Review of the Small Grants Mechanism - George Tillman, June 2003

> The objects of the Centre are to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions and, in carrying out those objects, . . . to assist the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovative skills and the institutions required to solve their problems.

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IDRC Act, 1970: para. 4(1)(b)

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1. Introduction

Background

In 1985, the Centre conducted a review to learn more about the Small Grants (SG) project mechanism to "clarify the most effective uses of this means of supporting research, and ensure greater consistency in management across the Centre."[1] The review examined the range of variation in Small Grants made between 1970 and 1984 to document how the Centre used this mechanism, and to clarify what a small grant project is and what contribution it was expected to make towards achieving the Centre's objectives. At the time, there was no formal definition of a small grant project. It was recognized that a key element was "*the appropriation of funds within a standard project format to be disbursed as small individual grants*."

Terms of Reference

In contracting the current review of the Small Grant mechanism, the Centre sought "to learn to what extent it offers more than an administrative mechanism by offering a program-enhancing, goal-focussed approach for achieving capacity building, institutional development, research output and Centre leadership and recognition." It speculated that an "examination of the similarities and differences across a sample of SG projects [might] suggest a new definition of the SG mechanism, one that contracts a seemingly large variety of projects into a smaller number of types, each defined by its use to deliver specific program goals."

The terms of reference directed that this review examine four dimensions:

1: The SG mechanism as a facility to open and explore (ramp up) a new program initiative around a development problem / issue targeted by the Centre.
2: The SG project as a facility for capacity building.
3: The cost considerations of SG projects compared to the 'standard' project.
4: The SG projects impact on the Centre's visibility.

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[1] Terms of Reference for a Professional Services Contract for a review of the Small Grants Mechanism (2003). All quotations in this Introduction are from this document.

A series of questions under the heading of each dimension was drafted to focus the review on specific administration and program issues (Annex A).

In other words, this review seeks to identify the salient characteristics of the Small Grant mechanism, and to determine whether any characteristics common to all Small Grant projects (or to a significant number of them) exist. It is not an evaluation of the activities that have been supported with it. Indeed, in the absence of a stated strategy or policy from which to derive indicators or benchmarks, no proper evaluation could be done.

Procedure

In developing the Terms of Reference, the Centre compiled an inventory of close to 60 Small Grants. It then selected for review a sample of 22 files that reflected as much as possible the diversity of the Centre's programs and administrative mechanisms (Annex B). Two of these files were for postgraduate studies programs; three comprised evaluations of Small Grants Programs; the rest involved research and research-based activities. One file was not available in time for the review. Nine of the files represented Centre-Administered Projects (CAP), nine were Recipient-Administered (RAP), and in three, the administration was split between the Centre and the Recipients (CAP-RAP). At least 3 of the CAPs are mainly administered by a regional office. Fifteen programs used a competitive process of one kind or another to select proposals for funding.

I used the focus questions as a matrix to collect and record information from the files. After comparing and collating this information, I developed and circulated questions for 21 Program Officers (Annex C) in order to interview them on their experience with Small Grants. Interviews were conducted in person, by telephone and by e-mail. The information from the interviews was compiled and compared to the information gathered from the files.

For comparison, I also reviewed a number of previous and current reviews and assessments of Small Grants (Annex D). We also decided to include in the study a brief comparison with the Special Initiatives Division (SID) awards programs: Corporate Citizenship Grants and Global and Emerging Issues.[2]

Constraints

This review was limited by three constraints which were deemed acceptable for its purposes: the state of the paper files consulted; the availability of Program Officers for interviews; and the time allocated for the study.

The units responsible for the files to be consulted provided the documentation available in Ottawa HQ. Some of these were courtesy files, while in one case the regional office concerned

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[2] Corporate Citizenship Grants (2001-2002) 100933; Global and Emerging Issues (2001-2002) 100948

provided the minimum documentation it could spare. As a result, few of the files contained complete documentation of decision-making procedures and processes, although all contained either a Project Appraisal Document (PAD) or Project Summary.

During the review a number of Program Initiatives (PIs) were holding meetings outside Ottawa, while some program officers (POs) were travelling. Many made special efforts to be available, but it was not possible to interview or receive information from all those contacted. Ten were able to provide information about their experience with Small Grants.

The review was contracted for a maximum of 27 days from late April to mid-June 2003. This period proved adequate for developing a general picture of the Small Grants mechanisms and processes, but was not exhaustive.

Consequently, the results of this review should be interpreted as indicative, rather than definitive.

2. Findings

2.1 File review

The review of 21 files yielded information about the process used to generate, assess and approve project proposals or protocols, and about the objectives and intentions of each program. The elements of each of these sets of information can be grouped by "salient" and "common" characteristics. By salient characteristics, I mean those elements that can be understood as operationalizing the Centre's mandate and program policies, such as capacity building, devolution or introducing new methodologies. Common characteristics are simply those other elements that appear in the vast majority, or all, of the projects reviewed, that do not derive from IDRC's mandate or program policies but are typical project operational procedures or processes.

2.1.1 Summary of salient characteristics

The evidence in the files suggests a cluster of elements that are salient to SG programs (SGPs). The emphases on and attention to each of these elements depend on the specific focus of the PI and of the project(s) within the PI - in other words, to the specific context of the SGP. The judgment of their salience is based on the intentions that appear in the design of each project, in most cases in the appraisal with the PAD. Other documents, such as Travel Reports and e-mail exchanges, sometimes reinforce these intentions.

These salient elements are: concern with basic scientific standards, devolution of program/project management, concern with participatory methodologies, introduction/strengthening of gender issues and methodologies, introduction/support of multidisciplinarity, introducing/testing of concepts and methodologies (including training established researchers), reinforcing/consolidating/broadening the reach of successful results (includes training young researchers), dissemination and application of research results, and concern with the influence and effect of research and research results on policy and practice.

All the programs evince a concern for ensuring that projects were based on basic scientific standards. Criteria for assessing the merit and relevance of proposals are stated in competition announcements or, where no competition is organized, set out and discussed with researchers as the basis for project development. Evaluation matrices and guides for reviewers appear in the files of the majority of cases. Records of the proceedings of selection committee meetings, however, rarely appear.

As mentioned in the Introduction, nine files represented Centre-Administered Projects (CAP), nine were Recipient-Administered (RAP), and in three, the administration was split between the Centre and the Recipients (CAP-RAP). Devolution of management to non-IDRC bodies only occurs when the Program Officer judges that the receiving institution or organization has the capacity at least to manage the disbursement of funds. In most RAP cases, however, the recipient manages more or less program activity, from publicity and selection to monitoring and dissemination of results. In only one case does the PAD cite IDRC's "broad desire" to devolve management responsibility to local or regional institutions.

Every file examined includes a mention or statement about introducing, promoting or strengthening methodologies that the Centre has identified as priorities: introducing/testing concepts and methodologies, including training established researchers in new methodologies (20); participatory research of various kinds (18); integrating gender issues and methodologies (16); and promoting and strengthening multidisciplinarity (13).

"Closing the loop" figures in several ways in virtually all the programs reviewed. It is conceived or presented as disseminating and applying research results (19); reinforcing or consolidating successful results, and broadening their reach, including the training of young researchers (9); and designing projects to include practical ways to transmit the results of research to decision-makers and stakeholders (8).

2.1.2   Summary of common characteristics

Common characteristics among the programs include inputs and decisions that occur at different points of the project process, from initial consideration of a program idea to dissemination of results. Like the salient characteristics, these common characteristics also involve differing degrees of intensity and attention on the part of program staff.

Every program includes some form of preliminary scouting or "scoping" of a field or region by POs to identify researchers and organizations and to determine possibilities for projects and partnerships. In the case of annual programs such as EEPSEA, scouting is part of the program's regular cycle. Often, this activity includes providing information to potential partners and recipients, and discussing specific issues and concerns with them, as well as assessing the capacity of institutions and organizations to manage a Small Grants Program. In six of the PADs, such scouting is mentioned specifically as an important element in the development of the project.

When PI teams decide that a SGP is feasible, whether as a stand-alone program, or as part of a larger project, they write an appraisal and submit a PAD for approval. Once the Centre has approved the PAD, a team takes one of several alternative steps, depending on the results of the preliminary scouting. A call for proposals may be circulated in a region or to identified institutions and organizations; negotiations may be opened with potential partners to develop the details of the SGP; or identified teams of researchers may be invited to present preliminary proposals for consideration in a workshop. A core objective at this stage is to ensure a match between IDRC's mandate and the priorities of the PI on one hand, and the interests and capabilities of potential recipients on the other. Thus, the team, in some cases together with external partners, defines the objectives of the SG program and the criteria for assessing proposals and draft papers.

The review or assessment process in competitive CAP programs begins with screening by a member of the PI team. In RAP programs, at least one PO normally participates in the screening by the administering organization. At least three persons participate in the final selection of projects: in CAP programs, these are members of the PI team, but may include external specialists. In RAP programs, a selection committee of specialists is struck by the recipient, in consultation with the coordinating PO, who also sits on the committee. Thirteen of the selection teams or committees included at least one external specialist. In seven programs, two committees exist: one to provide general guidance on administration and policy matters, and sometimes links to stakeholders. The other provides technical expertise and acts as the selection committee.

All of the SGPs include provisions for some form of networking among grant recipients: through an IDRC-supported and managed listserv, e-mail, Web sites, travel and exchange visits, and workshops or conferences. Similarly, all are oriented towards the dissemination of the results produced by recipients. The extent of these activities and their budgets varies widely.

Sixteen of the 21 SGPs included an extensive system of monitoring or accompaniment. Again, while each program had specific features, the components of these systems are comparable, comprising workshops at various stages of project development, execution and completion; and visits and regular communications by a PO or senior researcher. These provisions are designed to ensure the quality of research and training. Two programs only used an inception or completion workshop; two others employed a third party as monitor; and one provided no accompaniment to recipients.

2.1.3   Summary of characteristics that fall outside the salient and common groupings

A small number of programs had singular features:

- the MAPPA program depends largely on the intense investment of the coordinator, who appears to be something of a workaholic.

- the Ecohealth Awards and Agropolis Awards programs focus solely on advanced training.

- the Small Grants in Peace Building and Reconstruction program proceeded on an untested assumption that it could reach researchers who were not affiliated with higher education institutions, and that these small grants would not require extensive infrastructure support.

- the PAD of the VEEM program states that, contrary to the usual strategy of SGPs of expanding the number of contacts, the SGs will be used to target fewer institutions. They were a smaller component of a regular project, and were intended to complement a major research theme or to develop new research ideas.

- the VEEM and Engendering Research in Vietnam program files were the only ones to include comments on difficulties in working in a context in which three sets of cultural values were present: traditional Asian; the "command" economy; and IDRC.

- the Gender Unit does not conceive the Gender, Land Tenure and Globalization project as a Small Grants program.

- the SID programs are not explicitly related to PIS, although some awards include funds transferred from PI budgets by mutual agreement.

2.2 Responses from Program Officers

I was able to interview seven Program Officers, while three responded by e-mail to the questions that were circulated. These ten responses confirmed the general picture of the Small Grants mechanism that emerged from the file review, but added many nuances. They also provided information that could not be extracted from the files: primarily, comparisons of experience with Small Grants versus regular projects, and their perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of using the SG mechanism. The following paragraphs summarize the main comments on the elements I have called salient and common characteristics, followed by a summary of other observations and suggestions.

2.2.1   Comments on salient characteristics

These salient elements are: concern with basic scientific standards, devolution of program/project management, concern with participatory methodologies, introduction/strengthening of gender issues and methodologies, introduction/support of multidisciplinarity, introducing/testing of concepts and methodologies (including training established researchers), reinforcing/consolidating/broadening the reach of successful results (includes training young researchers), dissemination and application of research results, and concern with the influence and effect of research and research results on policy and practice.

Every responding PO confirmed that ensuring the application and observation of scientific standards is extremely important. One summarized this view and how it translates in competitive SG programs in these words:

"…. the intentions are to maintain standards whether they are regular grants or small grants. In regular grants if you are unhappy with say, the methodological rigour, you work at it with the proponent till it becomes right. In small grants, if you are unhappy with the methodological rigour, you don't vote to give it a grant. You give a grant to the proposal that has the appropriate methodological rigour for its project framework….In regular grants you don't have a choice, you are more or less committed to developing the baby and bring out a happy ending once you have made the bed and laid in it."

Non-competitive SG programs use a process similar to the one used in developing regular projects, in effect nursing project proposals along through a workshop and peer review. In at least one case, proposals that are revised in this process, but which still fail to meet criteria, are refused further support. The proposers are required to refund the support they have received.

The main comments on devolution emphasize that it does not reduce PO workload; in fact, it may increase. Several POs noted that a SG program requires at least 3 PYs, that it only transfers workload from Ottawa administration staff to the programs. One PO stated that six people spent "a good portion of their time" over a year designing and implementing their SG program. The positive side of this heavy investment of time and effort, however, is that the Centre derives considerable benefits in extended reach, detecting trends, and in interesting and often innovative results. Small grants empower networks of researchers and help to develop centres of excellence.

These benefits accrue more specifically in the introduction, promotion and strengthening of methodologies that the Centre has identified as priorities. All the responding POs indicated that Small Grants prove to be a very effective and efficient way to introduce both junior and senior researchers to new methodologies, or to provide them a way to learn and test them, at very low direct financial cost. They are used to strengthen researchers' capabilities by doing research in consultation and networking, rather than by training. They can also be used to explore new methodologies.

The picture of "closing the loop" that emerged from PO responses matches the one obtained from the files. One notes that the SG mechanism allows a "[f]ocus on applied research involving innovative and experimental elements but excluding infrastructure and development work that requires large amount of resources." The notion of scaling up was often mentioned. One respondent, however, commented that scaling up is usually thought of as applying lessons learned, generalizing from experience(s). He prefers to think of the CBNRM work in Asia as scaling out: replicating cases rather than generalizing from them. SG activities are too small, provide too little information, or data that are too particular to be generalized credibly or reliably. The work must therefore be repeated, duplicated a number of times before any general conclusions can be drawn.

2.2.2   Comments on common characteristics

All the comments from POs on scouting the field, developing a SGP and appraising its feasibility, and implementing and monitoring or accompanying it, agree on the intensity of this

work. Where developing a regular project takes from 6-12 months, SGPs generally are squeezed into a shorter time-frame. Because SGPs comprise from 3 or 4 to 10 separate projects, assessing, monitoring and closing the loop with them requires as much attention and time as do an equivalent number of regular projects.

2.2.3 Other comments

Most consistently and perhaps most interestingly, POs clearly see Small Grants as a very effective tool because of their flexibility in both specific uses and in the purposes that they advance. They also point out some hazards of SGPs. This collective perspective is best illustrated with selected comments.

Flexibility

SGs are used "consistently with the strategy" of the particular PI: small amounts are used in ways to reinforce or raise research standards, introduce new ideas and methodologies, broaden contacts or build networks, as appropriate to the region, locales and disciplines. For example, in the poorest regions of Asia, with weak institutions and researchers with weak English language skills, who are not familiar with interdisciplinary and participatory research, and whose scientific tradition is separate from Western science, CBNRM SGPs are non-competitive. By contrast, in Latin America, CBNRM works with well-established institutions and introduces new ideas in a competitive model because researchers there by and large are familiar with and competent in the standards and methodologies of Western science.

In other words, there is no one Small Grants style. You cut the Small Grants cloth according to your needs. Small Grants [are] a malleable mechanism to be used to complement other parts of our programmatic work.

So these SGs are still primarily capacity building - both of the researchers, and more broadly of the research capacity of the region. Capacity in the sense of research skills, not research administration.

It's important with SGs to hold workshops on human and social development, to place them at the centre of partners' perspectives.

SGs can be an instrument of consultation as well as to support research and training.

SGs can be used for dissemination; support to young researchers; project development; small studies; and consultancies to assess the relevance and applicability of proposals

[IDRC] is a catalyst to get people to think outside the box, to develop strategies for getting research applied. It's not a group of experts at the leading edge of research, but leaders in getting research into the market.

This [SGP] is strengthening capabilities by doing the research in consultation and networking, rather than by training.

Small Grants are especially useful for training; project development; exchanges with Canadian researchers; consultations; explorations; strengthening research capabilities; putting stakeholders and researchers together; and to ensure stronger proposals from complex projects. They keep the Centre open to new ideas, new people.

The best experience has been one which has supported peer exchange and learning from the outset, fostering peer support but also 'critical review' of each other's work or planned work under proposals.

Small grants give the opportunity to flesh out new and emerging partners working in key areas....[ ] they are seen as excellent mechanisms to reach out to a range of organizations/partners and build a community of practice.

Hazards

[POs] need to develop clear, well thought-out TORs and objectives [for SGPs].

A competitive SGP with many applications, depending solely on paper, not having face-to-face interaction with research groups is vulnerable to grantsmanship. The core issue is to make sure grantees have ownership of their project.

The competitive process raises expectations, but often the success rate is very low.

RAP risks your losing the content and integrating it into your programming psyche, because you are not monitoring it on a more regular basis.

Sometimes the work can be too much.

I think we underestimate the costs required to truly support the networking/cross-learning aspect. In that light, resources should .... be given in drawing synthesis across the projects (and learning). Explicit effort should also be given to documenting the process (and lessons learned).

2.3 Findings from other reviews, evaluations and assessments

Earlier reviews and evaluations emphasize capacity building, training, and identification of new partners as the main characteristics of SGPs. The procedures for soliciting and selecting grant recipients were similar to those found in the current review. These reviews expressed some concern about the dissemination of project results among stakeholders, and made recommendations for improving "closing the loop" activities. They do not mention using the mechanism specifically to identify, introduce or strengthen new ideas and methodologies.

Dr. Martín Mutica's 2002 assessment of the SGP to Natural Resource management noted that "The main underlying values are respected: transparency, devolution of responsibilities and specialization in the associated tasks," while "One of the more recurrent opinions among project teams is the value of the SGP as a meeting place for people interested in innovative methods for NRM. This recognition extends to the thematic aspects of the program—stakeholder analysis, community participation, consideration of the positive aspect of conflict, and evolution from conflict to collaboration."

3.   Analysis and observations

> ...development means giving people the power, that is adequate knowledge and capacity, to decide what is best for them, and to act accordingly in fulfilling their own destinies.
>
> *Empowerment Through Knowledge*, p. 12

3.1 General characteristics

The state of documentation

The documentation of the files examined is very uneven. Only a few contain full records of each stage of the process of soliciting and developing projects, assessing and selecting them, monitoring or accompanying them, and disseminating their results. The absence of a manual, and hence of no formal "standard" process or framework for classifying and keeping records specific to the SG process, partly explains this fact. That the main documentation for RAP SGPs, or those managed by regional offices, is not kept in Ottawa HQ, is another factor; I had only the courtesy file to examine in many of these cases.

In some programs which experienced difficulties in achieving their objectives, however, the lack of documentation and in particular a lack of concreteness in the PAD and appraisal suggest that the PI teams had not yet fully explored and understood the main implications and assumptions of their theme before designing the Small Grants Program. This may reflect the novelty of the theme, and the lack of IDRC experience in the area. As one PO observed: "Explicit effort should also be given to documenting the process (and lessons learned)."

Selection and development process

Whether the SG mechanism uses a competitive or a formative (scouting and development) approach, the process is remarkably consistent, even coherent. Inputs and decisions are made at different points of the process, and involve differing degrees of intensity and attention, but they have *grosso modo* the same characteristics across all the files I reviewed.

Generally speaking, the solicitation procedures are transparent, no matter what their structure. Distribution of publicity is in some cases limited by budget and capacity constraints, but the purpose and themes of programs are publicly announced, as are the program's criteria (eligibility,

minimum requirements of proposals, and at times information on budget guidelines and on IDRC expectations of outcomes - as with the Ecohealth Awards announcements). This information always includes a reference to contact IDC and the appropriate related Website.

Similarly, selection procedures are transparent. The responsible PO ensures that professional scientific standards are applied in assessing proposals in competitions, and in developing projects in formative SGPs, and that potential recipients understand this procedure. IDRC or the administering organization announces competition results publicly, and informs candidates whose proposals do not measure up to the standards. In formative SGPs, recipients whose work fails to meet agreed standards after they have been provided assistance to improve their projects, lose their grant, and in one case are required to return the funds.

It seems fair to conclude that:

- there is a generally accepted set of procedures and criteria to apply to the selection of SG recipients; but

- their conception and application in different environments are highly variable.

In other words, there is a coherent IDRC culture underlying SGPs, which allows PIs and POs to design programs that are sensitive to the local or regional environment, and to the expressed needs and interests of stakeholders and potential recipients.

Operationalizing the IDRC mandate

The expression of program purposes, goals and standards varies in emphasis and attention, depending on the specific focus of the PI and of the project(s) within the PI.

On the whole, SGPs consistently emphasize the importance and value of introducing and testing new concepts and methodologies. These include most recently participatory research of various kinds; integrating gender issues and methodologies; and promoting and strengthening multidisciplinary approaches and collaboration among research teams.

The Centre's policy on devolution finds logical expression in SG programs. But in the files reviewed, the documentation which refers to devolution as an aspect of the SG mechanism does not articulate its implications and consequences. It does refer to assumptions about the rationale for devolution - that it will transfer day-to-day work and administrative costs from IDRC to local or regional institutions and organizations, and so reduce the proportion of Centre overhead to project and program disbursements. Documents on file express both concern and confidence about the capacity of recipient institutions and organizations to manage SG activities, whether they have adequate resources and staff.

All the POs interviewed explained that in fact, both CAP and RAP SGPs require as much if not more of their time and effort, as do regular projects. At the same time, they unanimously believe

the investment well worth the benefits of developing more extensive networks of partners, identifying innovations more readily, promoting collaboration among diverse researchers and communities, and minimizing risks.

Relation of the SG mechanism to PI activities and objectives

In the limited sample of files I reviewed, PIs with some years of experience clearly conceive SGs as an integral part of a general funding strategy, both to consolidate ("formalize") activities that have developed into a more coherent network, and to bring in new ideas and people.[3] In organizational terms, the PI's activities are at a threshold. In these cases, the structure, criteria, recruitment and selection of 'projects' for Small Grants funds are generally well thought out and coherently expressed. Experimentation is thoughtful and deliberate. Small Grants are but one mechanism to advance the PI's agenda, to engage and support IDRC's interests.

Where the general strategy and objectives of a program have not yet been thoroughly and explicitly worked out, however, the definition of the practical details and consequences of SGPs tend to be less specific. Their potential results are conceived as compatible with IDRC's objectives. Their actual results help the PI to better understand the nature of the environment with which it is engaging.[4]

The flexibility and malleability of Small Grants enable PIs and secretariats to adapt their strategies and tactics to the realities on the ground. At some times, they use them to leverage resources (time and money) and implement devolution; at others, they use them as catalysts. Whether administered by the Centre or by recipients, whether used for scouting potential partners, training young or established researchers, strengthening proposals from complex projects, introducing and testing new concepts and methodologies, strengthening research capabilities, putting stakeholders and researchers together, supporting exchanges with Canadian researchers, conducting consultations and explorations, or reinforcing and consolidating successful results, Small Grants give credibility to IDRC's claim to responsiveness to the needs of researchers and to communities that need reliable knowledge to address their development challenges. They keep the Centre open to new ideas, to new people.

3.2 Chief trends

Within the general watchword that "You cut the Small Grants cloth according to your needs," four trends in the use of SGPs emerge from an examination of the files and the responses of POs. They comprise most of the salient characteristics noted in section 2 above:

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[3] see, for example: Research Network on Poverty and Economic Policy (PEP) (101378) or Vietnam Economic and Environmental Management Program (VEEM) (003099) or Small Grants Program on ICT Research in Latin America and the Caribbean (004439)

[4] see, for example: Small Grants in Peace Building and Reconstruction (003972)

- a concern with new theoretical approaches and methodologies: participatory community-based action-research, gender issues, and multidisciplinarity figure consistently in the design and implementation of small grants projects.

- maintaining strong research standards: a fundamental conviction that only well-designed and executed research can produce results that will contribute to social and human development comes through explicitly and between the lines.

- extending research partners to "non-research affiliates": this logical extension of the concern with participatory research and other innovative methodologies gives rise both to deliberately seeking out municipalities, non-governmental and civic associations and other partners outside education and research institutions, and to an awareness of new problems and challenges in designing and assessing project proposals, and in implementing them.

- "closing the loop": the emphases on community-based participatory research and on 'non-traditional' research partners contribute to a sharpened focus on the transfer and application of research results, usually by involving stakeholders in projects as early as possible, preferably in the design stage.

3.3 Variability

As one PO comments, "there is no one Small Grants style." Small Grants Programs and projects vary across and along any conceivable number of axes, from successful to failure, from narrow focus on a specific issue to scanning a field, from training to applied research, etc. It is this flexibility within the governing values of high research standards and appropriate response that constitutes the strength of the Small Grants mechanism. The variations in SGPs reflect the response that is deemed most appropriate to the environment, including inherent risks.

3.4 Main "outriders"

Two types of programs that use the Small Grant mechanisms are at the outer limit of variability:

- the Ecohealth and Acropolis Awards, whose sole focus is on training.

- the SID Grants (Corporate Citizenship Grants and Global and Emerging Issues) that go beyond support to research as conventionally understood, to "encourage development research and knowledge-based activities..."[5]

It is not useful to think of these programs as exceptions to the common trends in the use of Small Grants. Exception suggests deviance, whereas these programs clearly advance the Centre's

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[5] PAD in Corporate Citizenship Grants file 232-01-10093-001

mandate to extend research capacity and the application of research results. The Special Initiatives Division, for example, has the particular responsibility to connect the Centre with a large, diverse and scattered development community.[6]

4.   Responses to the Research Questions

This section presents responses to the questions included in the Terms of Reference concerning four general dimensions focussing on specific administration and program issues. These responses are based on the review of files and responses from Program Officers.

4.1 The SG mechanism as a facility to open and explore (ramp up) a new program initiative around a development problem / issue targeted by the Centre

To what extent do SG projects have as a primary objective:
to open new areas of research for Centre support;
to gain access to new development thinking;
to identify researchers and institutions poised to work on a new development problematic?

Response: All of these objectives figure in varying degrees in many of the SG projects reviewed, and are cited by POs in their responses. There is no specific point in a program at which the SG mechanism is used. For example, in the Ecohealth and Tropical diseases in Central America program, the SG mechanism is used as a secondary step towards developing the basis for a Request for Proposal for regular research projects. Ecohealth has used this process successfully in other regions.

What is the past history of SG projects opening up new areas which are subsequently taken on by PIs/Programs?

Response: Perhaps half a dozen of the projects reviewed give evidence of this progression, although some of them more properly move exploration along, and continue a past practice which has been successful in generating larger projects. It is more accurate to state that SG projects can open up new areas, develop or enhance research networks that will identify new areas, or have their results "scaled up" to have further and broader impact, which may result in exploring new areas.

What factors not covered in the above questions are also given as objectives (or reasons) to support SG projects?

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[6] cf. Canadian Partnerships Special Initiatives Program. CAID: A Discussion Paper. Tabled at the SMC Planning Retreat January 17/18, 1994; and Special Initiatives Division. Annual Report for 2001-2002. February 2003.

Response: A considerable number of factors are stated in the files, including IDRC's "broad desire" to devolve management responsibility to institutions; that small grants do not require extensive infrastructure support; latitude in defining research topics within the parameters of the program; to develop networks and workshops across boundaries; to provide support for research study or thesis abroad that is relevant to the program; to strengthen emerging interest in participatory action research; to maintain research support; "one tool for moving things along"; dissemination and application of results; to complement technical assistance, networking and study visits; to attract experienced young researchers; "an efficient tool to disseminate the basic concept underlying this new research area."

What budgetary issues / reasons are singled out as factors in the decision to use the SG mechanism?

Response: Small grants can yield considerable results, often of greater impact in proportion to the amount invested than regular project grants. POs agreed in their responses that Small Grants also function as a means of minimizing risks.

To what extent are the following statements true:

The preparation and oversight of SG projects are less demanding / more demanding in terms of professional inputs from program staff than would be the case with the Centres regular research grants?

Response: In the majority of cases, program staff input is more intense, and at least as demanding, if not more demanding, as is the case with regular grants. Two factors produce this effect: the comparatively shorter time for preparing and approving projects within a Small Grants program; and the number of projects involved. Each project in a SG program may well require as much oversight as a regular project.

The SG mechanism is used as a 'quick start' or a 'field scanning' approach used to put the PI, Program Area and Secretariat on the map or to identify where on the map it should be.

Response: It is used in this way in some cases, but not all, nor perhaps in the majority of cases.

The SG mechanism is used to reach annual appropriations targets.

Response: There is no evidence of this, although the Gender Unit (Gender, Land Tenure and Globalization) decided on this approach as a quick start to develop its portfolio of projects.

The SG mechanism is more likely to be used early in the life cycle of the PI, Program Area, and Secretariat.

Response: There is no evidence for this. The mechanism is used as a result of the PO's judgment of appropriate timing.

The SG mechanism is used to the same extent and much the same way by each Program Area, Secretariat and Program Initiatives.

Response: The mechanism is used in a broad variety of circumstances and in many specific ways by all Centre programs and units. In that sense, it is used to the same extent and in the same way(s) by all of them.

4.2 The SG project as a facility for capacity building

To what extent do SG projects have capacity building as, a) an overall objective or b) a particular objective:
   to develop the capacity of individual researchers;
   to develop capacity in institution;
   to produce high quality research results.

Response: Producing high quality research results is the most consistent overall objective. The files record it as a particular objective slightly fewer times (14) than developing the capacity of individual researchers (16). Developing institutional capacity appears as a particular objective in 12 cases. "Capacity" includes both institutional research managerial capacity, and individual and organizational research capacity. The comments of the POs confirm this relative balance of objectives.

To what extent do SG projects include counterparts (advisory committees, mentors) with the specific intent to strengthen research capacity?

Response: In addition to advisory committees and mentors, SG projects use formative workshops, listservs, independent monitors and experts, and technical advisory committees. Some projects require that individual recipients of training support have formal affiliation with a research team. Only one file held no evidence of this function, while all the POs confirmed it as an essential element. In other words, accompaniment of one kind or another is integral to SGPs.

Is there evidence that SG projects prepare individual researchers to move to a higher level of technical competence; for example, moving up to the larger standard research projects, going on for higher degrees?

Response: Evidence in 13 files suggests that researchers have moved to a higher level of competence. No systematic follow-up or tracer study of individuals appears in any of the files reviewed.

Is there evidence that SG projects enable institutions to improve their capacity to administer and manage research?

Response: The evidence is scattered, as no systematic effort to determine such outcomes is recorded. It appears that at least eight SGPs enabled institutions to improve these capacities to one degree or another.

> *Is there evidence that SG projects enable institutions to raise their profile, reputation on their community / constituency?*

Response: In at least seven cases, institutions and organizations raised their profile and reputation in some way. The absence of systematic follow-up on this issue makes it impossible to arrive at a more definite conclusion.

4.3 The cost considerations of SG projects compared to the 'standard' project

> *How does the level of effort (time) to bring a SG project to approval compare with the time to bring standard research grant to approval?*

Response: It is difficult to determine the level of effort required. Responses in interviews and file evidence suggest that in the large majority of cases, the time invested by IDRC staff is the same as or greater than those for a standard project. Most SGPs are very labour intensive. The comments in interviews indicate that the effort invested on Small Grants is more intensive, that is, they require an effort comparable to what is given to a regular grant, but compressed into a shorter time period.

> *How do SG CAP and RAP projects compare in terms of the time to bring to approval, a) with each other; and, b) with the time to bring a standard research grant to approval?*

Response: There is no discernible contrast or pattern in the time needed to bring CAP and RAP SG projects to approval. And, while it is difficult to make the comparison with standard research grants, the time is generally shorter. The time required to approve projects within a SGP is definitely shorter.

> *How does the staff time to monitor a SG project compare with the time to monitor standard research grant?*

Response: See above. The attention given to each project within a SGP is roughly comparable to that given to a standard grant.

> *How do SG CAP and RAP projects compare in terms of the time to monitor, a) with each other; and; b) with the time needed to monitor a standard research project?*

Response: See above.

> *How do SG RAP projects compare with regular research projects with respect to overheads?*

Response: As it was impossible to determine any answer to this question from the materials in the files, Grant Administration was asked to see what could be found through EPIK.

RAP recipients use on average 30% of the grants to administer distributive award projects, in addition to their own unquantified inputs. Variances are significant though. In many schemes, 50% of the IDRC grants are used to administer awards. Where local contributions are highest, only 15% of the IDRC funds are used in administration. It costs on average 8,000 CAD to IDRC to administer a RAP award project.

The average amount used on administrative costs on CAP awards is close to 40% of the appropriated value. Administrative funds are often used for staff but also for all types of "other" costs such as travel and publicity. The scatter of administration costs here is even greater than in RAP grants, as some schemes piggyback onto other projects where the labour is hidden, or where an intern is doing the bulk of the work. It costs on average 14,000 CAD to IDRC to administer a CAP award project (going light on program officer costs and totally neglecting the cost of CTAP staff who are involved in most schemes, at least in Ottawa).

If 13% of total project resources is the standard 'benchmark' cost of project administration, then small grant projects require an above average share of project resources to administer. But one could also say that the replacement or research assistant salaries that IDRC pays to institutions conducting research likely represent the salaries and other costs paid to the institutions looking after small grant programs. In the past, IDRC used 20% of the grant as a benchmark for gauging the reasonableness of research salaries.

4.4 The SG projects' impact on the Centre's visibility

Does the Centre maintain / enhance/ or lose recognition when it supports SG projects?

Response: Virtually no evidence relating to Centre recognition exists in the files reviewed. What does exist, together with the opinions of POs suggests, that the Centre maintains and enhances its recognition when it supports SGPs. Where competitions attract large numbers of proposals, it is possible that the low number of awards may create a negative impression. POs with experience with these projects, however, states that the clarity and transparency of the processes has promoted comprehension of the program, and so the Centre's image and recognition have not been damaged.

One suggestion that seems credible is that IDRC is perhaps more known than visible (plus connu que visible). That is, that its style and policies are known and appreciated, while its status and even existence as a specific organization is neither as clear, nor a matter of concern.

Is there any difference in the level of the Centre's recognition for RAP and CAP SG projects?

Response: Impossible to determine.

Is there a difference in the level of the Centre's recognition for SG projects and regular projects?

Response: Impossible to determine

5.   Conclusion

Research provides the means for the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and, thence, for development...IDRC is dedicated to creating, maintaining and enhancing research capacity in developing regions in response to needs that are determined by the people of those regions in the interest of equity and justice.

Empowerment Through Knowledge, p. 7

Are Small Grants a separate tool in the Program Officer's tool kit? Are they distinct from other tools? Are they specialized, used independently of other tools? In other words, what is their relation to other IDRC activity?

If we consider each individual grant in isolation, it can often be seen simply as a reduced version of a regular grant, whether for research, postgraduate training or conferences. The label "Small Grants" itself reinforces this impulse. The basic IDRC principles of project development, appraisal, implementation and dissemination apply.

But just as no projects funded in a Small Grants Program exist in isolation from their various environments - geographical, cultural, social, scientific, etc. - so Small Grant Programs exist within a larger context. Casting the net widely to include SID awards and the Ecohealth and Acropolis Awards, we can understand SGPs as a flexible instrument to express IDRC's mandate creatively. They do not provide a template for any particular activity, but rather a means to respond to needs that the Centre perceives to be pertinent to the evolution of its interests and objectives.

The great majority of SGPs can be understood as parts of a PI or secretariat program:

- as integral to a strategy to build research networks,
- as integral to a strategy to develop general research capacity in a region,
- as integral to a strategy to introduce and develop new ideas and methodologies,
- as integral to a strategy to augment multidisciplinary research skills and capacity....

.... and so on.

Small Grants are not conceived as distinct activities that can be justified solely on their own. To modify a favourite metaphor of several programs, they could be classed in two categories: an open window approach and a transom approach. The open window approach has a specifically

scientific or academic focus, and solicits proposals and applications in a variety of ways. Potential partners may be identified by POs in their regular travels; research teams are invited to submit proposals addressing specific issues or themes; or individuals are invited to submit applications for fellowships to support advanced training.

The transom metaphor is borrowed from publishing: an author submits a manuscript "over the transom" believing that it fits the publisher's list. The Small Grants Programs categorised as using the transom approach have a more generalized perspective than those using the open window approach. They accept unsolicited proposals based upon information which the presenters have received concerning IDRC's interests (this includes program announcements). In assessing these proposals, 'transom' SGPs apply the same rigour as in other programs, in order to ensure the validity and methodological soundness of research proposed in projects and other knowledge-based activities.

The substantive intention of all SGPs is to advance a "program," a concept encapsulating a broad range of activities. SGPs appear to be at various edges (not always at leading ones) of these activities, in a sort of Brownian motion in the vast pool of reality that may begin, at certain points and with the proper approach or method, to coalesce around or into a stable nucleus of knowledge.

The files examined in this review and the comments from Program Officers underline a core concern with methodology, with ensuring as much as possible that researchers of whatever status demonstrate and/or develop methodologies that meet the rigorous standards appropriate to their disciplines, to the generation of reliable knowledge. Sound method is seen to be an epistemological guarantee.

At the same time, this review has found a core concern with the material effect or influence of knowledge on practices and policies. Knowledge produced through rigorous methodology can have a positive effect, it is believed, that is more enduring and efficacious than brute trial-and-error. The assumption or argument is: if the methodology is sound, influence is more likely. Bringing stakeholders into the project process as early as possible reinforces the likelihood of adoption or consideration of research results by decision-makers, at whatever level.

Small Grants Programs thus exemplify and advance IDRC's mandate. They both reinforce its established programs and objectives, and help open new areas of activity.

Annex A

Small Grants analysis

Research Questions and Sources of Data

Dimension 1: The SG project as a facility to open and explore (ramp up) a new program initiative around a development problem/issue targeted by the Centre.

Sources of data: PI Prospectus; SG project proposal / appraisal Interview: Team Leader, PO

To what extent do SG projects have as a primary objective:
    to open new areas of research for Centre support;
    to gain access to new development thinking;
    to identify researchers and institutions poised to work on a new development problematic?

What is the past history of SG projects opening up new areas which are subsequently taken on by PIs/Programs?

What factors not covered in the above questions are also given as objectives (or reasons) to support SG projects?

What budgetary issues / reasons are singled out as factors in the decision to use the SG mechanism?

To what extent are the following statements true:

The preparation and oversight of SG projects are less demanding / more demanding in terms of professional inputs from program staff than would be the case with the Centres regular research grants?

The SG mechanism is used as a 'quick start' or a 'field scanning' approach used to put the PI, Program, Secretariat on the map or to identify where on the map it should be.

The SG mechanism is used to reach annual appropriations targets.

The SG mechanism is more likely to be used early in the life cycle of the PI, Program , Secretariat.

The SG mechanism is used to the same extent and much the same way by each Program Area, Secretariat, Program

Dimension 2: The SG project as a facility for capacity building and research production:

Source of data: PAD; project file; interview: recipients, leaders of the institutions; institutional profiles

To what extent do SG projects have capacity building as, a) an overall objective or b) a particular objective:
     to develop the capacity of individual researchers;
     to develop capacity in institution;
     to produce high quality research results

To what extent do SG projects include counterparts (advisory committees, mentors) with the specific intent to strengthen research capacity?

Is there evidence that SG projects prepare individual researchers to move to a higher level of technical competence; for example, moving up to the larger standard research projects, going on for higher degrees?

Is there evidence that SG projects enable institutions to improve their capacity to administer and manage research?

Is there evidence that SG projects enable institutions to raise their profile, reputation on their community / constituency?

Dimension 3: The cost considerations of SG projects compared to the 'standard' project

Source of data: PAD; Interview TL, PO; project file; PI work plan

How does the level of effort (time) to bring a SG project to approval compare with the time to bring standard research grant to approval?

How do SG CAP and RAP projects compare in terms of the time to bring to approval, a) with each other; and, b) with the time to bring a standard research grant to approval?

How does the staff time to monitor a SG project compare with the time to monitor standard research grant?

How do SG CAP and RAP projects compare in terms of the time to monitor, a) with each other; and; b) with the time needed to monitor a standard research project.

How do SG RAP projects compare with regular research projects with respect to overheads?

Dimension 4: The SG projects impact on the Centre's visibility

Source of data: Publicity material; Project Report; Web site; Publication.

Does the Centre maintain / enhance/ or loose recognition when it supports SG projects?

Is there any difference in the level of the Centre's recognition for RAP and CAP SG projects?

Is there a difference in the level of the Centre's recognition for SG projects and regular projects?

Annex B

Small Grants Sample

1. Ecohealth Awards (101238)

2. Ecohealth and Tropical diseases in Central America (100775)

3. Gender, Land Tenure and Globalization (101176)

4. Research Network on Poverty and Economic Policy (PEP) (101378)

5. Indigenous Knowledge Programme (2614)

6. Medicinal Plants Programme in Asia (MAPPA) (4359)

7. Capacity Development for Internet Use in Latin America and the Caribbean (04240)

8. ICT R&D Grants Program for Asia and the Pacific (101060) (003820)

9. Gender Factor in Agricultural Research Programs in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa (100633)

10. CBNRM and the Farmer-Centred Research Network - China (100732)

11. Vietnam Economic and Environmental Management Program (VEEM) (003099)

12. Central America and the World Economy (100721)

13. Agropolis Awards - phase II (100824)

14. Community Based Coastal Resource Management (Caribbean) Phase II (101156)

15. Fondo Mink'a de Chorlavi Project (100730)

16. Tobacco Control Research Competition in the Arab World. (001726-028)

17. EEPSEA

18. AERC

19. Small Grants Program on ICT Research in Latin America and the Caribbean (004439)

20. Enhancing Capacity to Engender Research for Sustainable Development - Vietnam (004562)

21. Small Grants in Peace Building and Reconstruction (003972)

22. Assessing the Contribution of Small Grants Programs to Natural Resources Management (101121)

Annex C

Questions for Program Officers

1. Please describe your best and worst experiences in administering Small Grants. What were the main factors involved in each case - what were the salient characteristics of the best, and what were the main problems generated by the worst?

2. What is your main reason for using Small Grants? In what circumstances do you consider Small Grants to be an effective mechanism?

3. How much time and energy does it take to establish and then manage or monitor Small Grants?

4. What are the main differences between the time and effort required to set up and run a Small Grants "program" and those demanded by a regular grant?

5. Is there any particular stage in the cycle of a PI that it is most appropriate or effective to use Small Grants?

6. What are the advantages of using Small Grants? Do their results help to advance the work of a PI, and if so, how? If not, why not?

7. What are the disadvantages of using Small Grants? What problems do they most commonly encounter or generate?

8. Are Small Grants more useful for building capacity (of individuals, of organizations and institutions) or for opening up new areas of research?

9. Are Small Grants an effective way to recruit new researchers for Centre programs?

10. Do process, standards and criteria for Small Grants differ from those applied in regular grants? If so, in what ways, and do you think they are justified or not?

11. If your PI had a significant increase in program budget, would you allocate all or a significant portion of it to Small Grants?

12. In your experience, how competitive are Small Grants? How do the selection process and results compare with those of regular grants?

13. What are the advantages and disadvantages of managing Small Grants as CAPs? as RAPs?

14. How do Small Grants affect the reputation and public image of the Centre?

15. Do you have any other comments about Small Grants as a mechanism for furthering the Centre's objectives?

Annex D

Previous and current reviews and assessments of Small Grants Programs

Baranyi, Stephen, March 2001. *Small Grants program Evaluation* [for PBR].

Bromley, Daniel and Gelia Castillo, February 2000. *Evaluation of the Economy and Environment Program for SE Asia (EEPSEA).*

Goodwin, Craufurd D. and Femi Kayode, April 1993. *The African Economic Research Consortium: An Evaluation of Phase II and a Look Ahead to Phase III.*

Henderson, David and John Loxley, July 26, 1996. *The African Economic Research Consortium: An Evaluation and Review.*

Kuwinpant, Preecha and Jacques Amyot, May 1985. *Review of Small Grants Programs in Southeast Asia: Thailand Case Study.*

Mujica, Martín, June 2002. *Assessing the Contribution of Small Grants Programs to Natural Resource Management. Final Report.*

Munasinghe, Mohan, October 1996. *Evaluation of the Economy and Environment Program for SE Asia.*

Office of Planning and Evaluation, July 1985. *A Review of Small Grants Programs Funded by the International Development Research Centre 1970-1984.*

Svendsen, Knud Erik, 1990. *African Economic Research Consortium: Research, Training and Related Activities From August, 1988 to January, 1990. An Evaluation.*