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EVALUATION HIGHLIGHT

The Sustainability Of IDRC-Supported Networks

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Report by Tricia Wind

"Network" is a term frequently met in the field of international development. Although people use the word to refer to many different types of shared activity—for example, partnerships, joint ventures, conferences, and forms of international cooperation—most would agree that mobilizing a network is often an effective way to move an initiative forward.

IDRC has always recognized the importance of networks in supporting development research, but now it has begun to systematically consolidate its understanding of these structures. Because the Centre's inventory of knowledge on networks has been scattered and buried in reams of documentation and in the tacit knowledge of staff and partners, this learning has been difficult to muster and to apply.

IDRC is now determined to bring to light the collective knowledge that, in company with its partners, it has assembled and stored. The Centre aims to become more aware of the rich experience it has gained in working with networks during the past decade, and to share this experience more widely. A strategic evaluation will begin to unlock this information and so provide a resource that will nourish more profound discussions and effective networks in future.

For the purpose of its evaluation, IDRC defines a "network" as a social arrangement comprising either organizations or individuals that is based on building relationships, sharing tasks, and working on mutual or joint activities. A network, in other words, is a forum for human exchange. The term does *not* apply, in this case, to information, access, or data swapping transactions (for example, LISTSERVs). Instead the emphasis is on those links that enable people to work together to generate knowledge and to develop skills while at the same time maintaining their autonomy.

The first stage in IDRC's evaluation is a straightforward document review that pulls together a wide sample of the tacit knowledge about networks that is held within the Centre's literature. The study concentrates on three core issues: the **intended results** of IDRC-supported networks, the **sustainability** of these networks, and the **coordination and governance** of these networks.

This highlight summarizes the report "Document Review on Network Sustainability: For IDRC's Evaluation Unit and the Network Working Group," which was prepared by Tricia Wind.

Sustainability: Four Key Questions

Like most donor organizations, IDRC is under pressure to show quick results. When it comes to supporting networks, however, the Centre has encountered particular obstacles. Networks are expensive; they require a lot of effort to coordinate, especially at the start; and many years may pass before they achieve top productivity.

How can IDRC help the networks that it supports to get beyond the costly, labour-intensive early years and into the more productive phases? How can IDRC ensure that they will continue to flourish after the Centre's funding has ended?

Tricia Wind's survey, which she calls "exploratory," seeks answers to four questions.

1. *What does IDRC mean by sustainability of networks?*

There is no easy definition of the word "sustainability." For one thing, the connotations of the catchphrase "sustainable development" only muddy the issue. Sustainability for a network, in fact, may be neither necessary nor important. Networks are often only program delivery mechanisms, not development goals in themselves. Improved livelihoods and environmental integrity ought to be sustainable; networks that work toward those goals need not be.

As IDRC's documents fail to turn up a satisfactory definition from any single author, Wind offers a general definition:

> **Sustainability means that a network continues to function until it achieves its goals, or until its members are no longer willing or able to continue, or until it becomes irrelevant.**

Meanwhile, she approaches the issue using a variety of paths and explores the dimensions or characteristics of sustainability that have been mentioned in IDRC documents.

Time: If a network is said to be sustainable, how long should it last? The documents suggest that networks can function anywhere from two years to over two decades, depending on its purpose.

Financing: Does IDRC expect that the networks it supports will be self-sufficient? The documents show that it does not make this assumption. In the Centre's experience, some networks have generated their own revenue, but most rely on a range of donor sources.

Relationships: What importance does IDRC attach to the social aspects of sustainability? It is no surprise that since IDRC defines networks as being social rather than technical arrangements, the documents indicate the high value attached to the continuing relationships among people.

Structure and process: In IDRC's view, does sustainability mean rigidity or inflexibility? In fact, the documents show that sustainable networks are highly adaptable. Over the course of their lifespans, many IDRC-supported networks change their title, their mandate, their subject, their methodologies, the products they offer, and their governance structures.

2. *When is sustainability a goal for networks, and when is it not a goal?*

In other words, which networks will endure and which will disappear? The answer depends on what type of IDRC documents one reads.

The Centre's more "theoretical" literature repeatedly points out that networks need not exist forever. These documents insist that the Centre should be specific from the start about how long it intends to support any particular network.

On the other hand, in the Centre's internal reviews or evaluations of particular networks, they are almost always expected to continue beyond the current phase of IDRC support. But these documents seldom say when the networks should wrap-up their activities, and few mention plans for the phase-out of support.

3. *What factors help or hinder the sustainability of networks?*

Wind outlines many practical ideas for keeping networks going.

Internal relations

Since IDRC's concept of network is that of a social entity, healthy internal relationships are, by definition, key to a network's sustainability.

Shared ownership and mutual trust are crucial. Ownership implies that members feel they drive the network as a whole, rather than just contribute to some of its activities.

How can IDRC encourage ownership and trust?

* From the start, support existing networks rather than try to create new ones—that is, seek out people who are already working together.

* Involve members in the startup planning, and assign responsibility for publicity and finances to members rather than to staff.

* Support communication across language barriers and make the effort to be multilingual, as appropriate.

* Define membership in a way that promotes continuity and institutional memory; for example, rather than invite parliamentarians, who come and go, invite long-term parliamentary staff.

* Allow members to retain their autonomy and their own personal and institutional commitments, and permit them to stay in the network even if they don't endorse everything it does.

* Handle with sensitivity the transition from a loose, decentralized network to a more institutionalized and formalized one.

Another aspect of good internal relations is the **dynamism of connections and of interactions among members**.

How can IDRC encourage this energy?

* Ensure that members have enough common cultural and professional background to collaborate effectively: be mindful that language barriers and religious differences will sometimes inhibit cooperation.

* Beware of relying on a few strong leaders: while many charismatic people have sustained networks, a safer strategy may be a system of shared or rotational leadership.

* Cultivate horizontal communication within the network: instead of channeling information through a central coordinator, urge messages to move horizontally among members themselves.

Internal relations are affected also by **how members are chosen**.

Membership in some networks is firmly restricted to certain categories of individuals or institutions, for example, to researchers, members of nongovernmental organizations, or policymakers. The documents show that such a "closed" network can become highly prestigious, and its reputation can help it attract the funding that will secure its continuity.

Networks that are open to anyone interested in participating can claim to be representative and accountable—qualities that may help it be sustainable. The documents suggest, moreover, that open networks may be more exposed to changes in the research environment and therefore more adaptable to new situations. On the other hand, they also suggest that when members are allowed to be active at whatever level they choose, a network may have a problem enforcing performance standards.

Another issue is the choice of **individual versus institutional membership**.

Clearly, individuals help drive a network with their personal energy, ideas, and momentum. Moreover, it's easier to achieve collaboration among individuals than among institutions. And networks may be able to attract a broader range of individual members than only those attached to institutions.

 Institutional membership, however, offers continuity despite the turnover of individual representatives. Furthermore, institutions bring considerable resources to any network, such as office space, salaries, administrative support, and a broad circle of contacts and influence.

Finally, internal relations are affected by the **participation philosophy** of network members.

In the "equality" model, for example, authority is decentralized and all members are expected to contribute equally. No one is the "expert," and the health of the network depends on the balance of relationships within it.

In the "circles of participation" model, members engage to varying degrees and their participation may change over time. Some choose to receive information, others choose to join specific projects, and others choose to take on leadership roles.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the power structure of any network is affected by the strength of individual personalities. Regardless of their formal position, the visionary leader, the hard-working coordinator, and the dedicated volunteer can wield considerable influence.

External relationships and contextual factors

A network's links with outside bodies—donors, end users, advocacy allies and targets, the general public—also affect its sustainability.

Obviously, a network's **credibility** is linked to its viability. Networks can enhance their credentials simply by producing quality research. Another way is to maintain high ethical standards, in terms of both the research process and the application of findings. Involving research users in the design of the network, ensuring that its end products are appropriate to the target audience, and active self-promotion are other ways for a network to boost its image.

Networks must also be alert to negative impacts they might have on others, and ensure **constructive engagement and communications**. For example, a network operating in a politically charged environment is wise to inform about its activities. Potential donors must be kept in the loop. And good relations with institutional members should be preserved, for example, by taking care not to overexploit the resources and services they contribute.

Networks that operate in **violent contexts** face special considerations. Not only are researchers themselves often at risk, but their research findings can have dangerous political consequences. Moreover, it may be difficult for researchers in conflict zones to collaborate with people outside it—that is, the basic functioning of the entire network may be jeopardized.

Ongoing relevance

A network should be **adaptable**. Formal evaluation of the network structure itself—as opposed to its projects—can help redefine goals, strategies, and processes. In general, a network that adopts a broad working theme allows "space" for members to pursue their own projects. However, a theme that is too broad may leave members with little common ground for collaboration.

A network must **bring in new people**. Programs like small grants competitions can attract new members. Some networks animate a general shift in member activity by rotating leaders. Another tactic is to invite outsiders to participate in a network project, and thereby draw them into the ongoing structure.

Finally, networks are generally more sustainable when they have **projects**. Projects give members "deadlines, output, meetings, real activity"—that is, a shared purpose. Donors also need to see for themselves that a network is doing productive work rather than being merely a shell.

Financial sustainability

Money is rightly at the forefront of any discussion of sustainability. Four factors contribute to a network's financial well-being.

The most common is **securing long-term and flexible donor commitments**, not just for projects but also for administrative and operational costs. Some networks need donors that are patient and open to risks and ambiguity. Many donors may have difficulty supporting such networks because their funding is expected to produce rapid and tangible results.

Another strategy is **diversifying the network donor base**. For networks operating in politically sensitive contexts, finding a range of donors is crucial to demonstrating that the network is not beholden to any special interest. When soliciting new donors, staff and members of any network should be able to explain concisely the network's program, remember to include overhead costs in project proposals, divide network activities into manageable chunks that specific donors can support, and invite donors to join the network structure.

Networks can also **generate their own revenues**, for example by selling their research results, by charging membership fees, or by acting as consultants. Such activities, however, risk diverting a network from its core purpose.

Finally, networks can **minimize their operating costs**. They can resist paying international levels for salaries and offices, and can enlist members to contribute volunteer labour.

Housing

A sustainable network needs an institutional home. Lodged in a place where it is recognized and respected, a network can secure funding more easily and can draw upon the institution's prestige, contacts, resources, and services.

IDRC has incubated networks within its own offices or with other Canadian hosts, but then devolved them to Southern institutions. Devolution empowers Southern research systems and ensures that the network remains locally based and relevant.

The Centre has helped some networks incorporate as independent legal identities. This approach works when a loose "movement" wants to govern itself better or needs to rationalize its appeals to donors. It is also a good strategy when no single institution exists that can give the network an adequate home.

Finally, some Centre-supported networks have transferred their activities, themes, and products to other institutions in order to ensure that these things survive beyond the lifespan of the network.

4. When a network is planned to have a limited lifespan, what factors facilitate productive functioning and a satisfactory wrapping-up or completion of the network?

This question went unanswered. IDRC has documented little experience with networks that wrapped up in a formal and constructive way. This question remains to be answered and documented by IDRC and its network partners.

Highlight prepared by Patrick Kavanagh, March 2005