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The International Development Research Centre is a public corporation created by the Parliament of Canada in 1970 to help developing countries use science and technology to find practical, long-term solutions to the social, economic and environmental problems they face. Support is directed toward developing an indigenous research capacity to sustain policies and technologies that developing countries need to build healthier, more equitable and more prosperous societies.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is Canada's lead agency for development assistance. It has a mandate to support sustainable development, in order to reduce poverty and to contribute to a more secure, equitable, and prosper

Building Learning Systems for Honduran Development



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An initiative of the International Development Research
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In Latin America and the Caribbean, only Haiti and Guatemala rank as poorer nations than Honduras. Approximately 53 percent of Honduras' 7.2 million people live in poverty. Proper sanitation is lacking for 31 percent of Hondurans and 13 percent of the population has no access to potable water. These burdens weigh most heavily on women, children, indigenous people and other vulnerable populations. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch deepened the nation's widespread poverty when it killed some 7,000 Hondurans and left up to 1.5 million homeless.

In this context, Honduras urgently needs efficiency, knowledge, and best practices in development interventions. Unfortunately, the reality for practitioners has been just the opposite. They often lack information on how best to design and implement projects. Where information does exist, it is not readily accessible or available in user-friendly format. Comprehensive and relevant research to inform planning is lacking. As a result, development projects and policy are rarely based on evidence and seldom integrate lessons from past experiences.

Moreover, most development initiatives lack mechanisms to capture and document learning as it unfolds. Projects rarely compile, analyze and accumulate knowledge during their lifetimes, or capture lessons to apply to future projects. Little monitoring occurs to build learning into the project cycle to facilitate adjustments along the way. It is common practice to "reinvent the wheel" with each new initiative.

The double challenge of addressing Honduras' development needs and doing so in ways that build on knowledge has been the focus of five years of collaboration between the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

Following the devastation of Hurricane Mitch, the government of Honduras began its national reconstruction with support from the international community. CIDA created a development assistance strategy based on the development priorities expressed in Honduras' poverty reduction strategy paper and on previous Canadian assistance in the country. As a complement to the CIDA strategy, IDRC began the five-year initiative "Building Learning Systems for Honduran Development" in 2002. Designed by IDRC and co-funded by CIDA, the initiative has aimed to build research and learning activities into development practice in Honduras.



Learning systems are methods, processes and activities that enable people to create, organize and share knowledge that can help make better institutional decisions and more appropriate interventions. The integration of learning systems within an organization, institution or network establishes practices and mechanisms that facilitate collective knowledge generation.

The goal of the Building Learning Systems Initiative has been to strengthen the capacity of people and institutions in Honduras to create and use sound knowledge to improve development practice for the benefit of poor and other vulnerable populations. The working assumption of the project is that dialogue combined with research and collaborative learning significantly improves development interventions.

IDRC's approach in Honduras has been double-pronged. It was essential to build the capacities of Honduran development practitioners in participatory research and learning methods. At the same time, these methods had to be applied in actual projects to generate knowledge on issues that would contribute to the country's development efforts.

During the initiative's first two years, activities responded primarily to the challenge of overcoming weak institutional capacity to carry out development projects that integrate learning in Honduras. Thus, the main focus was on capacity building, training, partnerships and project development. The initiative centered around building the capacities of partners in several research and learning methodologies, including systematization, outcome mapping and social analysis systems. In subsequent years, project implementation and monitoring took centre stage. The projects concentrated on specific sectors and geographic locations in Honduras (Olancho and the north coast) in line with CIDA priorities. Initially, agriculture and natural resource management were the primary sectors. Later, health and local economic development were added at the request of Honduran partners.

The nine briefs in this series highlight key projects and include work on participatory watershed management, farmer field schools, alternative conflict management, local economic development, and migration and remittances. The series also features the pilot program for national development research known as PRIDE, which promises to continue building on IDRC's investments in promoting research for development in Honduras.

Through consistent and continuous support many Honduran partners have succeeded in building skills and capacities to use research and learning to improve development initiatives. In order to continue building on these efforts, IDRC invites governments, donors and development practitioners to review these experiences and to engage with partners in areas of mutual interest.

