

**External Review of the Rimisp Rural Territorial Dynamics (RTD) Project:
Synthesis of Science/Policy Influence and Organizational Evaluations**

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Introduction

Rimisp Core Support for Rural Development Research (Rimisp-Rural Territorial Dynamics or RTD Project) is a five-year program funded by IDRC in July, 2007 at a level of \$10M; supplementary funding of approximately \$4M has been provided to date by other donors. The program integrates and synthesizes policy, practice and intellectual debate at a flexible, sub-national geographic scale in a way that links and cuts across disciplines. The *general objective* of this research-based policy advisory and capacity building program is to contribute to the design and implementation of more comprehensive, cross-cutting and effective public policies that will stimulate and support rural territorial dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The initiative was designed and implemented through a networked program involving a diversity of actors.

This external evaluation builds on previous evaluations and is divided into two components, the first focusing on scientific contributions and policy influence,¹ and the second focusing on organizational issues.² This document synthesizes the results of both evaluation components.

Data gathering for the evaluations was undertaken using a mix of methods including; reviews of selected documents; interviews with selected Rimisp staff; and interviews with key network members and representatives of research and development organizations working in LAC, and (to a limited degree) with development experts working in Asia and Africa. Over 100 individuals were contacted, including those who participated in evaluators' site visits to Chile, Peru, Ecuador and El Salvador. An online survey was developed and sent to the approximately 12,000 individuals and organizations listed in the current Rimisp database of contacts. A technical evaluation of the Rimisp-RTD website was also undertaken.

Evaluation Findings

Research Activities – Research began with the preparation of detailed maps (referred to here as 'poverty maps') for eleven countries in LAC that depicted changes over time at municipal-level in per capita income, poverty and income distribution, and then used these maps to select for detailed study 19 territories that had successfully promoted per capita income growth. The final phase of research is synthesizing scientific contributions and distilling policy messages.

Scientific Contributions – Scientific contributions began with the identification of the few geographic areas that had experienced rural income growth in LAC over the past two decades or so. Research on these success stories is making more concrete the notion and the potential usefulness of territories for science and for policy. It became clear that territories could be *created* based on shared, grass-roots visions of the opportunities for sustainable, inclusive growth, and on the shared commitments to promote it. New sets of actors, new rules of engagement, and new sets of supporting policies are required to identify and to solve territorial problems, and there are efficiency gains associated with doing so. Innovative contributions by the private sector and by actors from medium-sized cities will be fundamental in many cases. A broader gender lens addresses differences in access to markets, credit, assets, etc. among males, females and other demographic groups, and focused attention on the bidirectional links between

¹ For details, see External Review of the Rimisp Rural Territorial Dynamics (RTD) Project: Scientific Contributions and Policy Influence (Vosti, 2011).

² For details, see External Review of the Rimisp Rural Territorial Dynamics (RTD) Project: Organizational Issues (Weyrauch, 2011).

differential access and sustainable, inclusive growth. The disconnects between traditional policy instruments and those required to promote rural territorial dynamics are identified, and solutions are proposed in some cases. The circumstances under which place-based policies may be more cost-effective than spatially-blind policies are beginning to emerge. The final round of synthesis work should identify the territorial characteristics that are necessary for sustainable, inclusive growth to take place, and the policy actions required to shape them.

Research Productivity – The scientific program continues to mid-2012 and products will emerge for several years thereafter. To date, approximately 100 internally reviewed Working Papers have been produced. Five papers derived from this Working Paper series have been published in peer-reviewed outlets (with others currently under review) and many of the Working Papers will be included in four edited volumes and a planned special issue of an international journal. When all of the planned publications emerge, the body of Rimisp-DTR published work will be well within the acceptable range for a project of this type and scale, both in terms of volume and quality.

Policy Influence – Even at this early stage, Rimisp-RTD has achieved considerable policy influence. The Rimisp-RTD poverty maps forcefully remind stakeholders of the persistent pockets of rural poverty that remain in LAC, and highlight the small collection of successes that may be replicable with innovative policy action. The territorial focus reverses the trend towards atomistic decentralization, calls instead for planning and cooperation among selected (usually neighboring) administrative units, and provides guidance regarding which stakeholders to involve and how to do so – the Humedal Cerron Grande Project in El Salvador and the Chiloé Project in Chile demonstrate the logic and effectiveness of this approach. Working Groups on Rural Poverty and Development, such as the one officially launched recently in Mexico, make use of evidence-based policy guidance from Rimisp-RTD, and international agencies such as IFAD are reshaping their rural development strategies based on the concept of territories and the results emerging from Rimisp-RTD research. The recent elevation of two Rimisp-RTD collaborators to ministerial-level positions in LAC reflects the high quality and degrees of policy engagement of many Rimisp-RTD collaborators, and is also a signal of the expected benefits of the territorial focus.

Enhanced Funding Situation – The size and modality of the IDRC support to Rimisp in general, and to Rimisp-DTR in particular, have helped in several ways to strengthen and solidify Rimisp's position as a world-class rural development knowledge center with a regional focus on LAC. The volume of funding allowed Rimisp to swiftly expand its regional network, broaden the geographic scope of research activities, and increase and diversify its collaborator base. The modality of funding (which permitted great flexibility in selecting research themes, partners and sites, and in balancing donors' subregional and research-versus-outreach preferences) helped Rimisp increase research efficiency, expand outreach activities, and secure significant amounts of counterpart funding. Finally, an innovative and critical element of the project was the specific allocation of funds for organizational development; these funds allowed Rimisp (as a whole) to make key internal investments.

Organizational Changes – Since 2007, Rimisp has undergone an organizational overhaul, including important improvements in governance and administration. Externally, an International Board now provides strategic advice on scientific and organizational issues. Internally, an Executive Director now manages the organization with the assistance of new Technical and Administrative Committees, and several strategic hires that filled gaps in

expertise/experience. Financial management is on a much more solid footing, with reduced exposure to risk. The organization is now much larger and more diverse, with increased female participation in research and management activities and decisions.

These investments also facilitated the establishment of a larger and stronger regional presence in LAC, primarily via RTD's extensive, effective regional network that currently includes more than 180 partners and collaborators in 11 countries. Network members include researchers, policymakers, private companies and civil society organizations interested in rural development, some of which manage collaborative RTD research projects funded through Rimisp-RTD. Since 2007, the network has extended its reach (both in terms of geographic scope, and the types and quantities of information exchanged), improved the quality of its interactions, and constructed a clearer sense of direction and purpose. The communication of research results and their policy implications has been significantly enhanced through the creation of a Communications Unit that plays a strategic role in developing and delivering a tailored set of products, such as the publication *Equitierra* with more than 5,000 subscribers.

Conclusions and Issues Raised During the Evaluation

An impressive and regionally unique combination of scientific output, policy influence and organizational structure has emerged at Rimisp over the past four years – much of this progress would not have occurred without the IDRC grant, which we view as cost-effective. Scientifically, the Rimisp-RTD project has undertaken a body of research on rural territorial dynamics that is unprecedented in LAC as regards its geographic scope, its uniformity and its depth. The combination of organizational changes, network expansion, and improved funding has strengthened Rimisp's positioning and sustainability. An expanded network of research collaborators, many of whom are politically well-connected and very active, have allowed Rimisp to establish large and efficient research projects, and to leverage preliminary learning and research results into policy influence.

A new Rimisp has been developed over the past four years or so. The new organizational structure will mature; the current portfolio of RTD research projects will conclude and their results will be distilled, synthesized and published. Policies guiding rural development in LAC will be influenced by these results directly through Rimisp-RTD activities, and indirectly via those of network partners and others. But even during this final phase of the current IDRC grant, some important issues will need to be addressed, many of which arose in the context of this external review. We address a few of them here.

While the preliminary round of site-specific and synthesis work will be concluded by mid-2012, there was general agreement that much important work will remain to be done and that continuity in research focus would pay dividends as regards scientific output, positioning and sustainability.

Two, perhaps compatible, views emerged regarding the future of the Rimisp-RTD network in LAC. First, some partnerships in the network could be science-led, with the results of the 19 case studies identifying gaps in knowledge and the research locations/issues to fill them. Second, a larger set of partnerships could be formed to provide evidence-based guidance on territorial development policy issues. Rimisp could adapt the methods, materials and messages

from the countries where it is currently engaged in intense policy dialogs (e.g., Ecuador, Chile, and increasingly, Mexico) and use these as examples to develop new skills and practices among collaborators in other countries in LAC.

Rimisp has very clearly become a reference point for researchers and an entry point for donors interested/active in LAC, but influence outside of LAC has been smaller. There was general agreement that relatively small investments in document and website translation, a website upgrade, and strategic involvement in international events convened by others could help extend the reach of Rimisp without compromising ongoing activities and partnerships in LAC. Greatly expanding Rimisp-RTD research/outreach activities outside of LAC was not generally recommended.

Finally, there was general agreement that Rimisp needs a new funding model. As the international community continues its drift away from LAC and towards poor countries in other regions, Rimisp will find it increasingly challenging to rally support from extra-regional sources. Thus, Rimisp will have to diversify its funding sources with a special emphasis on seeking national and subnational support within LAC, and develop an internal mechanism for doing so.