

FINDINGS BRIEF – External Program Review 2015

Information & Networks Program

Program Reviews at IDRC are a two-part process. They begin with the program reflecting on its own achievements in terms of 3 issues: strategy and evolution, outcomes, and the main lessons learned from experience. Following this, an independent and external panel judges the appropriateness of program implementation, the quality of research, and the relevance and significance of program outcomes – all with a view to identifying key issues for management consideration. In combination, the internal and external review facilitate instrumental learning and accountability.

This findings brief provides a high level overview of the External Review of the Information & Networks (I&N) Program. It begins with contextual information on the program, followed by a summary of the external review findings, and finally outlines key issues for IDRC’s Board of Governors’ consideration.

External Program Reviews are conducted by experienced, esteemed, and fully independent subject matter experts: the I&N review was prepared by Daniel J. Paré, Manuel Acevedo, and Martha A. Garcia-Murillo. The full External Review Report and I&N’s Final Prospectus Report are available on IDRC’s website. External Reviews address four issues:

- 1 - To what extent are program outcomes relevant and significant?
- 2 - Overall, was the quality of research supported by the program acceptable?
- 3 - How did the program perform in implementing its prospectus?
- 4 - What are the key issues for IDRC’s Board of Governors and senior management?

Overview of the Information & Networks Program

The I&N program aims to understand the opportunities and risks of information networks for people in developing countries, and to influence the creation of policies that will leverage the positive benefits of the networked society for the greatest number of people. I&N’s programming focuses on establishing policy, competency and awareness around openness, digital rights, and inclusiveness. From its inception in 2011 to the beginning of this evaluation period (May 2015), I&N’s portfolio includes 106 projects with a total budget of CA\$78.6 million.

Summary of I&N External Review Findings

I&N outcomes and results:

Overall, the external review panel considers the **outcomes emanating from the I&N program to date to be highly relevant and valuable**. The panel was tasked with verifying the relevance and significance of the four interconnected program-level outcomes identified by I&N in their Final Prospectus Report.

1. Enhancing the quality of openness to enable development: the panel concludes that the return on investment from the resources placed in advancing the field of Open Development is evident: whereas in 2011 IDRC was internationally renowned for the Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) research it supported, in 2015 it is **widely recognized as being at the forefront of the Open Development field** and in understanding how populations in the global South use information and networks. I&N is advancing access to knowledge and producing cutting-edge research. The panel flagged a number of project outputs including the *Open Data Barometer*, an internationally recognized resource for gauging the implementation of open data policies, and the *SciELO Index*, a bibliographic database and digital library of open access journals that significantly enhances access to important regional and global research.

The panel pointed to I&N's co-hosting of the International Open Data Conference (IODC) in May 2015 as strong evidence of influence in this area. This landmark meeting took stock of learning from open data initiatives throughout the world to foster strategic international collaborations aimed at enhancing democracy, building prosperity, and ensuring that everyone benefits from the opportunities open data affords. In the words of Tony Clement, President of the Treasury Board of Canada, the IODC provided "an unprecedented opportunity for the international open data community to meet, make connections, and work together to enable the open data revolution."

2. Protecting human rights: the panel determines that this focus is timely and relevant given that human rights are increasingly being threatened by government and commercial efforts to control cyberspace through surveillance, censorship and diminishing Internet freedoms. The panel notes that **I&N has expanded the field of digital rights research by partnering with recognized leaders and catalyzing research participation** from civil society organizations with an activist profile. In terms of rights-related policy effects, the panel confirmed that I&N-supported research has had important influence, including work on privacy protection in India, on Brazil's Internet Bill of Rights, in Zimbabwe on restricting access to personal data from mobile phone subscribers, and the revising of an online defamation law in Indonesia. The panel also suggests that future programs better draw upon the lessons in IDRC's knowledge base regarding capacity building and influencing policy in order to improve monitoring for connecting research and policy.

3. Catalyzing inclusion in the benefits of informations networks: the evaluation finds an **increased understanding of how underprivileged populations use ICTs**, especially given that in 2011 little was known about how the poor actually use ICTs, and whether access was universal. The panel highlights a range of examples, including advanced knowledge about the way fishers and farmers use technology in their business practise. An I&N-supported household survey, recognized for having wide value to agencies like the World Bank, has helped elucidate important habits and deficiencies in how the poor use ICTs. The panel notes a troubling possibility that, due to budget constraints, this survey may no longer be conducted in as many countries thus reducing its potential value.

4. Field building: this outcome area aimed to build the field of information networks by

transcending the limitations of traditional disciplinary silos. This proved to be very challenging. The panel endorses I&N's decision to place greater emphasis on Open Development as a field of study and less of an explicit focus on supporting interdisciplinary research. The panel finds I&N's Final Prospectus Report offers persuasive evidence of building research capacity of young scholars and actively contributing to the concept of open development as a line of research and practise (led mainly by I&N team members). However, they question the value-added of positioning Field Building as an outcome.

Quality of I&N supported research:

Based on its review of the evidence, **the panel finds that the research produced by I&N supported projects is of high quality, and frequently innovative** as recognized by external key informants. Three factors are seen as contributing to the quality of the work being produced: 1) the presence of Program Officers in the field who understand the environment and work with grantees to minimize risks; 2) knowledge to find local partners that can deliver quality; and 3) pairing young researchers with their more senior counterparts, and/or the pairing of researchers from developing and developed countries.

The I&N program has supported the production of original and relevant research outputs facilitating greater understanding of the emergent field of Open Development. Notable examples are the collaboration between a public and private institution that provided insights about the manner in which networks are opening opportunities for work, and the *Mobile Price Index* that empowered populations in both Africa and Asia. **When examining the issue of gender-responsiveness, the panel finds that much work remains to be done.** Less than ten percent of the sampled research outputs were assessed as adequately gender responsive.

The panel finds that knowledge accessibility and sharing was generally good, with grantees disseminating their work through conferences, web portals, and project websites. Not all outputs acknowledge IDRC support, and the panel believes this marks **a lost and inexpensive opportunity to enhance awareness of IDRC-supported research.** While it is next to impossible to predict whether research outputs have been well-timed, many grantees counted timeliness and actionability among their limitations.

I&N Prospectus implementation and strategy evolution:

The panel concludes that I&N's selection of Openness, Rights, Inclusion, and Field-building as interconnected outcome areas in 2010/11 **was visionary and responded to demands from the global South.** The implementation of the I&N Prospectus was well managed with effective use financial and human resources. In their interviews with project managers the panel consistently received commendable expressions of the commitment and support provided by Program Officers. Programming was coherent with objectives and the I&N team exhibited flexibility and generally made appropriate choices in strategy evolution. The panel finds that **the decision to assign the main programming priority to Openness demonstrates an astute reading of the dynamic transformations taking place in developmental, policy, and scholarly domains.**

Where there were limitations, they were related to (i) a lack of conceptual clarity regarding innovation; (ii) difficulties in successfully promoting interdisciplinary research; (iii) shortcomings in actualizing gender-responsiveness at the project level; and (iv) complexities associated with networks and the networking modality.

What are the key issues for IDRC’s Board of Governors and senior management?

The panel’s review makes clear that the I&N program is making a positive contribution to the building of an evidence-based critical southern perspective about the promises and pitfalls of networked economies. It also reveals some important issues requiring attention as IDRC moves forward in supporting and catalyzing development research.

1. **Synthesize, codify, and communicate lessons learned.** IDRC distinguishes itself as a key generator of evidence-based development knowledge. However, the panel concludes there is a need to more effectively harness, communicate, and implement lessons learned from IDRC programs. This requires a continued valorization of learning within the organization through evaluation and the implementation of measures to systematize and harness the lessons drawn from program experiences.
2. **Integrate development networks as agents of change in program strategies.** With its long tradition of creating and supporting networks, IDRC is in a privileged position to harness the administrative, capacity-building, collaborative, and productive benefits they afford provided it can effectively manage their inherent complexities. This calls for continued research into the conditions that enable networks as agents of change.
3. **Programming in Openness, Rights, and Inclusion will continue to be highly relevant.** The panel believes that open data and open government will continue to be crucial aspects of development worthy of much needed research support for years to come. It is equally important to recognize that innovations in information and communication technologies afford as many opportunities for reaping benefits as they do opportunities for infringing upon rights. The importance of understanding how these rights are being affected will not diminish and constitutes a key component of Open Development.
4. **Effectively integrating gender analysis skills.** The ongoing challenges with realizing gender-related objectives – which pre-date the I&N Program – begs the question of whether grantees are equipped to deal with meaningful gender analysis and whether they have sufficient incentives. Actualizing meaningful gender analysis in future programming is likely to be contingent upon integrating clearly defined gender-specific program outcomes, providing the necessary financial and capacity building resources, and seeking to work with grantees that are concerned *a priori* with gender-focused research. It is important to acknowledge that meaningful gender analysis takes time. The requisite changes in behaviours, relationships, and activities are not bound to program cycles.