

Integrating organizational strengthening into program design — key questions for consideration

Purpose of this brief

When designing programs, including calls for proposals, research for development (R4D) funders can address key design considerations for organizational strengthening. This brief uses the [Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations](#) to share lessons on how to incorporate organizational strengthening. It suggests questions to consider in program design and implementation, with the aim of informing how R4D funders foster leading organizations and networks.

Who this is for

This content will be of interest to those who are designing R4D programs, awarding grants, facilitating consultations or working with research partners. While designed with International Development Research Centre (IDRC) staff in mind, this document will likely be widely relevant to other funders undertaking similar work.

About the evaluation

The [Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations](#) examined the strategies and results of incorporating organizational strengthening into research programs, and how investing in organizations and networks can help them become leading organizations that are sustainable, effective and influential. Elements of this brief also draw on findings from the [Think Tank Initiative evaluation](#) of 43 IDRC-funded think tanks in 20 countries.

Funders and funding

Funders make countless decisions, both planned and emergent, about how to contribute to organizational strengthening throughout the life of a program. Decision-making might involve, for example, seeking information on communications or gender capacity, assessing the

organization's ability to engage users or connecting partners to others in the ecosystem.

While the provision of effective support typically requires a fluid, tailored partnership rather than a formulaic approach, patterns emerge around the types of questions that funders can ask themselves as they

do this work. Using findings from the [Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations](#), this brief explores key features of good organizational strengthening and suggests what funders should consider as they develop and implement programs.

The findings in this brief are organized around three overarching themes that together present a comprehensive framework¹ for identifying key features of organizational leadership:

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 - **Theme 1, Organizational structures and processes** — The institutional infrastructure of the organization including governance, management, human resources and resource mobilization
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 - **Theme 2, Research and uptake** — The organization's capacity to produce good quality research, engage users and be a trusted source of evidence to inform change
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 - **Theme 3, Interface with others** — The ability to strategically engage with the world and build a niche

Key to supporting organizational strength is to provide appropriate funding modalities. Multifaceted funding, such as core funding, flexible research grants and strategic organizational development (OD) support can enable organizational strengthening, as well as bolster research, uptake and partnerships. This can include:

- Core funding, with the explicit and primary objective of supporting organizational strengthening activities, with no specific research outputs required from the grant
- Flexible funding that is for a specific research project but flexible enough to also be used for organizational strengthening
- Strategic OD-specific support programs, typically for a specific aspect of OD such as evaluation capacity or resource mobilization

In the following sections, we explore key takeaways under each theme and propose questions that can be used to integrate these approaches in program design.

Theme 1: Organizational structures and processes



The first theme is related to the institutional infrastructure of an organization — both its structures and processes. A leading organization tends to be one with a strong institutional set up, which provides a foundation for flourishing in research, advocacy or policy fields. This theme comprises governance structures, strategic planning, knowledge management systems, financial management capacity and resource mobilization planning.

Support for resource mobilization strategy development was the most common type of support IDRC provided under this theme. This type of support helped move organizations away from sole-source funding dependency and towards greater sustainability. Approaches included offering resource mobilization workshops, providing guidance to organizations, covering external consultant costs for developing resource mobilization strategies and the timely prompting of organizations to create strategies internally. To continue achieving these results, the evaluation recommended requesting — and in some cases requiring — that organizations develop resource mobilization strategies. IDRC grantees also indicated that the following characteristics of the support were helpful:

- Program Officers and Grant Administration Officers taking a hands-on approach in informing the design of their organizational **governance**, including the development of organizational charters and Boards of Governors. Organizations with less than five years of support significantly benefited from this.

¹ This framework was developed by the evaluation team at Universalia for the [Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations](#).

Table 1: Types of support for organizational structures and processes

Type of support	Description
Governance	<u>Establishing/revamping of governance structures</u> : Ranged from setting up governance frameworks in the case of newly-established organisations to the revision of the governance structures to addressing issues that come with the expansion of an organisation.
Management	<u>Setting up of (or improvements) in management/operational structures of practices</u> : Included setting up or improving organisations and networks, the establishment or changes in administrative, financial, grant management systems, procurement, or evaluation practices, procedures, guidelines, etc.
Human Resources	<u>Staff recruitment</u> : Addressed staffing challenges in the funded organisations, enabled the staffing of positions ranging from high-level management personnel (e.g. Executive Directors, department managers) to researchers and administrative staff.
Resource Mobilization	<u>Implementation of resource mobilization strategies/activities</u> : Included exploring means for diversifying resources and attracting additional sources of funding to ensure an organisation's financial sustainability.

- Support with **monitoring, evaluation and learning** in areas such as internal monitoring systems, log frames, Theory of Change development and financial audits. Developing these systems helped organizations set long-term resource mobilization strategies, improve organizational learning and prepare for future engagement with other donors.
- Working with organizations to clarify and construct the appropriate framing and **integration of gender equality** (e.g. diversifying the representation on their boards to include more women, integrating gender analysis in research or including gender specialists on research teams) as a factor of their being/becoming leading organizations.
- Support focused on developing greater gender-sensitive intentionality around **human resource management**. This is an area with significant potential for greater investment.

Theme 2: Research and uptake



A leading R4D organization generally has the capacity to produce good quality research, is a trusted source of evidence to inform change, has the demonstrated capacity to consistently generate evidence and is recognized for its contributions. The second leadership theme pertains to research capacity, research output and recognized contributions to change.

One key factor that grantees consistently report as valuable is the **ongoing support of program officers** and other staff. In a partnership-based approach such as this, program officers play a key role in tailoring support — be it financial, institutional, research, capacity strengthening or network-building — to the articulated needs and priorities of grantees. This tailored support has created an active dialogue, with grantees focused

Table 2: Types of support for research and uptake

Type of support	Description
Research Capacity	<p><u>Building/strengthening staff capacities</u>: Undertaken through trainings, workshops, courses, etc., ranging from strengthening staff research capacities in general to strengthening specific technical capacities (e.g. building capacity to undertake policy relevant analysis, training in advanced lab techniques, etc.).</p> <p><u>Technology acquisition, development or improvement</u>: Ranged from the acquisition of new web products and services, to accounting software and geodatabase.</p>
Research Production	<p><u>Provision of flexible R4D funding for research projects</u>: Allowed for the implementation of research projects (including research, evidence generation, uptake processes, etc.), while also contributing to organisational, structural development.</p>
Engaging Users	<p><u>Planning and implementing communication and engagement strategies</u>: Contributing support aimed at ensuring that research is effectively disseminated and shared, is well positioned for use, and is published and circulated through academic and non-academic channels.</p>

on the quality of their research and with important methodological implications regarding the research itself and its positioning for uptake. Program officers are involved in selecting grantees, developing relations of trust and familiarity with them and supporting them through the life-cycle of grants. Other important areas of support include:

- Encouraging grantees to deliver **high-quality research**, sometimes outside their comfort zones, which can also expand organizational leadership opportunities
- Providing support to develop **communications capacities** that can also enhance policy engagement, widen the external audiences and increase the ability to convene key policy discussions
- Strengthening capacity around **gender analysis**, including engaging **gender specialists** for expert guidance

Theme 3: Interface with others



Following a strong institutional set-up and the production of valued research, a leading organization strategically engages with the world and supports the uptake and delivery of research where it is needed. The organization is able to articulate a clear niche, gain visibility and inspire others. A leading organization has accumulated social capital — manifested through networks, partnerships and collaborations — which informs its research agenda and is also a conduit for the application of this research.

In the evaluation, IDRC grantees reported being supported to thrive outwards, and appreciated opportunities to engage with their wider organizational ecosystems. With regard to **building leading networks**, the findings indicated that funders should continue working with networks to identify needs for organizational strengthening and, in particular, to

Table 3: Types of support for interface with others

Type of support	Description
Reach and Visibility	<u>Facilitating exchanges</u> : Enabling collaborations and partnerships between key actors (e.g. researchers, government officials/policy makers, etc.) operating in similar fields, facilitating an organisation's abilities to organize, as participate in key events (meetings/conferences/forums, etc.) and platforms for exchanges, dissemination and sharing of research products/results.
Niche	<u>Tailored organisational mission and presence</u> : Contributing to helping tailor an organisation's purpose (including its mission and mandate), developing greater recognition for its agenda and approach, as well as helping to adapt its architectures, including its constitutive membership (e.g. with network members) and geographic presence (e.g. helping to establish additional offices/nodes in countries/regions).

assess the merits of providing support in relation to establishing or developing secretariats. Results of this tailored networking and reputation-building support, according to grantees, include creating demand for specific research, enabling dialogue between researchers and policymakers, creating advocacy opportunities with policymakers and facilitating regional network development. Other areas of support include:

- **Cultivating and communicating a niche** — Helping organizations foster their own unique visions and supporting them as they define and communicate their niche.
- **Extending reach through visibility, networks, partnerships and collaborations** — Organizational reach refers to how organizations connect their work with external actors, organizations, institutions or governing bodies in their spheres of influence. This can be

at a community, national, regional or global scale depending on the mandate of the organization. Effectively maximizing reach was foundational to organizations' perceptions of the extent to which they considered themselves as leading. Larger organizations in the evaluation also noted the expansion of their organizational presence either through sub-regional geographies or through more effective communication across international networks.

- **Being supported to take leading roles in inspiring others** — A fairly high proportion of the organizations included in the evaluation sample assumed leading roles in inspiring or positively impacting other organizations in the Global South, through participation in research activities, attending conferences and generally increasing their regional presence.

Key questions for integrating organizational strengthening into program design

Grantmakers can ask themselves the following key questions to consider how they are supporting organizational leadership.



Theme 1

Organizational structures and processes

- What is the most appropriate funding modality to support organizational strengthening? Consider a diverse range such as core, flexible and strategic funds and adapt as necessary to meet program goals.
- Is there a resource mobilization strategy in place and, if not, is there scope for the program to support this?
- What monitoring, evaluation and learning systems (including internal monitoring, log frames, Theory of Change, etc.) exist or are needed?
- How is gender equality being framed and integrated at an organizational level for both programming and internal policies?
- How well are underrepresented groups such as women and minorities being represented on the organization's board of governors and in senior management, and is this something that can be addressed by the program?



Theme 2

Research and uptake

- What strategies can we use to strengthen research quality and push grantees beyond their comfort zone?
- Is the grant flexible enough to allow for the implementation of the research project while contributing to organizational strengthening?

- Does the organization have the capacity to do gender analysis? If not, should we help build this capacity?
- Are there gender specialists at the organization and, if not, can we support their engagement?
- Does the organization have a communications department or dedicated communications officers and, if not, how can we support stronger communications in support of research uptake?



Theme 3 Interface with others

- Does the organization have a niche and, if so, is it effectively communicating it?
- If the program is supporting networks, is there a need to better understand their organizational-strengthening support needs — for example, is there a need for secretariat building and development support?
- Has embedded support related to strengthening emerging R4D leaders within the organization been considered? Refer to [Table 1 in Brief 1](#) in this series for a range of potential approaches, such as mentoring, networking and collaborative leadership.
- Are grantee organizations being connected with relevant external actors, organizations, institutions or governing bodies?

This brief was prepared by Shannon Sutton (independent consultant), with inputs from Amy Etherington and Hayley Price-Kelly (IDRC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of IDRC or its Board of Governors. The brief is based on findings of the following evaluations:

- Abitbol, Eric; Rastogi, Archi; Arsenault, Mariane; Rouleau, Esther; Pembleton, Corey; Amery, Hussein. (2018) Evaluation of IDRC's contribution to building leading organisations
- Christoplos, Ian; Pain, Adam; Kluyskens, Jups; Fruhling, Pierre. (2019) External evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) phase two, 2014-2019

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