

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE

# IDRC at 40

A Brief History



## Ideas. Innovation. Impact.

To achieve self-reliance, poor communities need answers to questions like: How can we grow more and healthier food? Protect our health? Create jobs? Since 1970, IDRC has supported research in developing countries to answer these questions.

IDRC also encourages sharing this knowledge with policymakers, other researchers, and communities around the world. The result is innovative, lasting local solutions that aim to bring choice and change to those who need it most.

# The International Development Research Centre at 40

## A Brief History

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A 40% reduction in child mortality in Tanzania. Legal reforms ending the “water war” in Bolivia. Employment and dignity for impoverished women in Morocco. Modern communications linking the people of Mongolia. A smooth transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa.

When the **International Development Research Centre** (IDRC) was created in 1970, such dramatic improvements in people’s lives were a distant hope. These improvements are just a few of the countless benefits of the applied research — carried out by the people of those countries — that has created new knowledge to aid the economic and social advancement of their societies.



## Origins and launch: Seeking a “new instrument”

The concept of “international development” — meaning the quest for sustainable solutions to the social and economic problems of poor countries — took concrete form during and after World War II. Spurred by the urgent need for reconstruction, by the precarious economies of newly decolonized territories, by Cold War rivalries, and by other factors, nations quickly established new channels to deliver different forms of development assistance. These included the Marshall Plan, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations itself.

All these institutions assumed that science, technology, and rational management would help lift countries out of poverty. This approach was entrenched by US President Harry Truman in his 1949 inaugural address — a statement generally regarded as launching the era of modern official development assistance (ODA). Convinced that the technologies that had worked for rich countries would provide the same positive results when transplanted to poorer regions, Truman called on his fellow Americans to “embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”

Canada’s earliest official involvement in providing development assistance was its participation, starting in 1950, in the Commonwealth’s Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development in South and

Southeast Asia. In 1960, Canada sought to rationalize its growing provision of ODA by creating a new federal agency, the External Aid Office.

Meanwhile, the wider Canadian community also contributed to the assistance effort. The missionary movement had long been active in providing education and medical care overseas, and many Canadians continued to support non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Unitarian Service Committee and World University Service of Canada.

## Development from within

When the United Nations declared the 1960s its first Development Decade, it proposed an ambitious program of international economic cooperation toward self-sustaining economic growth and “social advancement.” Later in the decade, however, it became evident that the high expectations raised by this program would not be met. One of several reasons cited for the failure was that Truman’s assumption had been flawed — the path to development already taken by rich countries could not simply be “transferred” to poorer regions.

Another reason was the meagre amount of resources devoted to research and development (R&D) within developing countries — as little as 2% of global R&D expenditures. This acute shortage of trained researchers and scientists limited progress, as did the isolation of these few experts from their peers elsewhere in the world.

Thus the idea began to take hold that development must be pursued from within the developing world itself, if necessary with financial and other kinds of

◀ In the Middle East, access to safe water has been central to IDRC’s focus.



Centre, seated, Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson. To his left, Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson).

support from abroad. The concept — which ultimately would form the core principle of IDRC — was championed during the 1960s by several distinguished and influential people.

The concept is embedded, for example, in the notion of “sustainable development,” an idea promoted by British economist, journalist, and educator Barbara Ward (Lady Jackson) long before the term became popular. Ward would play a significant role in the creation of IDRC, particularly by way of her association with Canadian entrepreneur, humanitarian, and public servant Maurice Strong.

In 1966 Strong was appointed head of the External Aid Office. In 1968, after he led that organization’s evolution to become the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Strong served as CIDA’s first president. Ward and Strong shared a concern about the misconceived preference for large technical assistance projects and about the fallacy of “trickle down” assumptions, which held that benefits for the wealthy would

naturally spread to the wider population. Convinced that the gap between rich and poor countries in research and technical capability hindered development, Strong and others decided that a new kind of agency was required.

### All-party support

The 1967 celebrations surrounding Canada’s centenary as a nation — particularly Montréal’s Expo 67 and its theme of *Man and his World* — gave this country greater confidence about its place in the international community. In June, only three weeks before the national birthday, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson proposed that Canada establish a research centre for international development, “a new instrument, concentrating more attention and resources on applying technology to the solution of [. . .] economic and social problems on a global basis.”

Strong advocated the creation of Pearson’s “new instrument.” He saw it as providing forward-thinking approaches to international challenges that could not be addressed by way of more conventional programs. He understood that aid in science and technology areas differs from other forms of aid: research takes a long time to pay off, for instance, and it can be a high-risk venture. For three years, discussion and debate among politicians and bureaucrats hammered out the details of the instrument’s role and structure.

After his retirement from politics, Pearson chaired the World Bank’s Commission on International Development, a group of leaders assembled to assess the consequences of 20 years of development assistance. Its 1969 report, *Partners in Development (The Pearson*

*Report*), declared that “...cooperation for development means more than a simple transfer of funds. It means a set of new relationships... founded on mutual understanding and self-respect... [and]...a clear division of responsibilities which meets the needs of both partners.”

Pearson’s successor as prime minister, the Rt. Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, proposed to establish an “international development research centre.” In this organization, the strengths of research, observation, analysis, and collaboration would replace prescription from afar, and would enable countries being assisted to identify for themselves their development challenges and to mobilize their institutional, financial, and human resources.

The parliamentary bill to establish IDRC attracted all-party support. IDRC was to be a different kind of public institution — apolitical and operating at arms-length from government; scientific in method; and with governance structures that emphasized long-term priorities.

*An Act to Establish the International Development Research Centre* passed Parliament unanimously — a rare occurrence — and received royal assent on May 13, 1970.

*We started out with the feeling that this gap in science and technology was a fundamental one, that not enough was being done in this area, as we asked ‘How best can Canada take an important initiative in this area?’ And the IDRC, after a long process, became the initiative.*

— Maurice Strong, in David Spurgeon (ed.) *Give Us the Tools: Science and Technology for Development*, Ottawa, 1979

## The 1970s: Building credibility, gaining respect

The institution that emerged was unique in terms of its objectives, structure, and operations.

IDRC was a Crown corporation, or parastatal, financed by appropriations made annually by the Canadian Parliament (with provision for funds from other agencies if that was considered desirable). Direction and control came from a board of 21 members, of whom only 11 needed to be Canadians; the remaining 10 positions ensured that the perspective and experience from developing and other countries were represented.

IDRC’s objectives, as stated in the *Act*, are “...to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means of applying and adapting scientific, technical, and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions.” The broad



During the 1970s, IDRC’s focus was agriculture, food, and nutrition.



IDRC's first Board of Governors meeting, October 1970.

scope of this mandate provided the leeway allowing the Board of Governors to implement IDRC's collaborative approach.

At its inaugural meeting in October 1970, the Board approved a defining statement that underscored IDRC's uniqueness and established its enduring philosophy and tone. Recognizing that developing countries might feel "aid weariness," IDRC pledged to work in collaboration with researchers in poor countries. These affiliations would be "founded on a confidence that they, not we, are the best judges of what is relevant to their circumstances."

To provide local perspectives on its programming, to nurture these collaborations, and to monitor risks, IDRC determined to establish a "catalytic presence" in developing regions. During the 1970s, therefore, it set up regional offices in Singapore, Colombia (which later relocated to Uruguay), Senegal, Kenya, and Lebanon (which later relocated to Egypt).

## Long-term investment

From its inception IDRC dedicated itself to the task specified in the *Act*: "to assist the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovation skills and the institutions required to solve their problems." This kind of long-term investment in self-directed development was at the time an innovation. And, as IDRC would come to appreciate, it was a challenge balancing the need for on-the-job training of inexperienced scientists with the demand for research products of a standard sufficiently high to guide the development process.

IDRC-supported projects during this first decade usually focused on single commodities, single crops, and single centres of economic activity, and were typically confined to a single scientific discipline. The Centre's programming units were organized along traditional academic lines, under four broad themes. These were selected to help those people least able to benefit immediately from available technologies: rural dwellers and women.

IDRC's prime focus was agriculture (including forestry and fisheries), food, and nutrition. A second priority was health and healthcare delivery, including water and sanitation. Because food issues were related to population pressures, a large part of this program's work was dedicated to the study of family planning. These two programs in the natural sciences found a ready fit with national and international agriculture and health research activities.

In Cambodia, IDRC supports research into infectious disease transmission. ▶







IDRC/N. MCKEE

### Food for the hungry

IDRC initially focused its agricultural support on subsistence food crops such as cassava, a daily staple for hundreds of millions of the world's poor. The cassava program, co-funded by CIDA, mobilized a network of global experts to pool their knowledge to find ways to combat diseases affecting this crop.

In 1972, IDRC joined forces with the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Colombia to establish the Cassava Information Centre. This pioneering documentation service consolidated a database of global knowledge about cassava, making it easier for specialists to disseminate and share their findings. The outcome has been, over the years, more food for the world's hungry. The initiative continues to show lasting impacts: in 2009 CIAT and other grantees completed the first draft sequence of the cassava genome, data that will accelerate breeding programs and develop new varieties adapted to the needs of the poor.

Third, IDRC was far ahead of its time in creating a division of information sciences. Long before the Internet was invented, IDRC recognized that the “knowledge gap” aggravating poverty needed to be addressed by advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the sharing of knowledge.

Finally — and controversially, in a development community then dominated by the hard sciences — IDRC established a social sciences division. The Centre was aware that, even where adequate technical solutions are available, these solutions are not necessarily “self-executing.” The success of any innovation depends also on social, economic, political, and environmental factors; research needs to take account of these “soft” issues as well as the hard science and technology.

The Centre's operational style stressed a small in-house research capacity, a highly competent scientific staff, and an emphasis on supporting developing-country researchers. Where possible, IDRC aimed to involve several countries and institutions in its grants. And it used its resources to supplement locally supported activities and expand local research opportunities through collaboration with those engaged in similar problems elsewhere. These principles remain central to IDRC's operations today.

IDRC's regional structure reinforced the multi-country research networks it cultivated. These networks — which have become another hallmark of the Centre's approach — helped build capacity by encouraging experienced researchers to mentor junior colleagues. They promoted comparative research that strengthened data collection and analysis. And as vehicles for disseminating results, networks enabled IDRC to make

findings available to varied actors: to other researchers, to policymakers, and to community leaders.

By the end of the 1970s, IDRC had funded about 150 networks. Some were small and narrowly focused; for example, the collaboration between scientists in Newfoundland and in West Africa who studied ways to control the black fly, the vector of river blindness. At the other extreme were enterprises like Technonet Asia: a cooperative network of development-support institutions providing industrial extension services, it began in 1972, became self-sufficient in 1983, and was still thriving in 2010.

### Practical problem solving

While most IDRC-funded projects were small, the Centre carried out one ambitious initiative during this era that set benchmarks for later efforts. The three-year multidisciplinary “science and technology policy instruments” project involved 10 countries and was designed, among other goals, to develop indigenous self-reliance in science and technology. Its findings contributed to the pivotal 1979 United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, held in Vienna.

Because IDRC was oriented toward practical problem solving, it began to invite decision-makers to join in research projects, even at the design stages. This innovation ensured that the ultimate findings would more likely relate to policy goals. It also served to break down barriers that often separated decision-makers and scientists. Eventually, this mingling paid off in other ways, when a number of IDRC-funded researchers went on to occupy senior positions in the



### Building institutions

Hunger and malnutrition are common in many parts of the world. During the years following World War II, research on new varieties of wheat, rice, and other crops brought the “green revolution” to Asia and Latin America. In 1971, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) was created to extend these victories through greater coordination and investment. CGIAR’s worldwide alliance of governments, NGOs, and international research institutes is devoted to increasing food production in developing countries.

Aware that success lay in such intellectual and funding collaborations, IDRC helped create two CGIAR centres, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas in 1975 and the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry (now the World Agroforestry Centre) in 1978. IDRC has continued to support the GGIAR and has renewed its support for the technical aspects of agricultural research.



governments of their home countries, as well as in academia and in international organizations (see “Recognizing excellence,” page 27).

By the end of its first decade, IDRC had matured beyond its experimental phase and had funded some 1,000 projects. Its philosophy of encouraging local self-reliance through collaboration influenced other key development organizations, including the Ford Foundation and the Australian Agricultural Centre. It enjoyed a solid reputation worldwide as a leading development organization characterized by integrity, innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness. A 1982 review by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada reported: “Most project recipients we interviewed considered the IDRC approach superior to that of other international aid agencies.”

*The International Development Research Centre is a public corporation. Within the familiar framework of corporate organization we are the directors; our shareholders, the people of Canada; our clients, the world’s poor. Our shareholders have established the enterprise because they believe that this form of organization can best address the problems of creating, adapting and transferring technologies which, when applied, will accelerate the blurring of the line between deep poverty and towering affluence that now separates the mass of mankind from the few.*

— W. David Hopper, president, 1970–1978, to the Board of Governors at its inaugural meeting

- ◀ [Information and communication technologies foster learning and improved livelihoods.](#)

## The 1980s: Reflection and adaptation

At the end of IDRC’s first decade, the global outlook was bleak. Soaring energy and food prices had delivered crippling blows to developing countries. Food production, while increasing, could barely keep pace with population growth. Health care and education continued to lag behind demand. Within Canada, meanwhile, the changing domestic political environment in which IDRC operated called for a reassessment of the Centre’s operations.

Against this backdrop, IDRC asked itself: what have we achieved so far, and how can we do better?

In response to these questions, the Centre set out to refine its evaluation mechanisms and its strategic planning. IDRC was one of the first development organizations, in fact, to undertake formal self-assessments: it has since become a global leader in the field of evaluation. And to ensure that maximum use was being made of the results of the research it supported — a body of knowledge unique in the development field — IDRC set out to engage with policymakers in developing countries to determine how this research could more effectively solve their problems.

### Answering Canada’s call

The early 1980s saw a significant increase in the number of projects funded, as well as the launch of a special program to encourage collaboration between research groups overseas and in Canada. The impetus came from the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development. In fulfillment of a pledge



IDRC: N. MCKEE

### Food security in the Philippines

Milkfish is the unofficial national symbol of the Philippines. It is a major food in that country and, given the population's rice-based diet, a primary source of protein. In the past, wild capture was characterized by feast-or-famine yields, resulting in unstable prices.

Philippine researchers had shown that milkfish could be bred in cages immersed in coastal waters, but efforts to breed them and to set up fish farms failed. Research funded by IDRC demonstrated that a hormone, gonadotropin, was required to induce spawning. Subsequent studies developed a process to isolate the active agent from the pituitary gland of the male and to perfect its inoculation into the female.

Milkfish farms based on this scientific work provided managed supplies of an important food crop, and brought the added benefits of business development and employment. Today, milkfish remains a significant aquaculture harvest in the Philippines.

made there, the Canadian government provided IDRC with additional funds to support this special program. Its mandate ranged across the spectrum of the Centre's established work, but also allowed for cooperative research in any subject of importance to developing countries and in which there was a recognized Canadian expertise.

Following another UN conference in 1981 on new and renewable sources of energy, the Canadian government again asked IDRC to take responsibility for a program of research, this time on the energy problems of developing countries. Building on previous studies supported by the Centre, the Board approved an expanded program of support for energy research, and established an international advisory body — the Energy Research Group — to guide the \$10 million, four-year effort.

### Support for democracy

IDRC's arms-length relationship with the Canadian government was underscored when the Board responded to human rights violations by the dictatorship in Chile. While Canada's government maintained diplomatic relations with the Government of Chile, IDRC — with the government's full blessing — used its political neutrality to fund local institutions in which many social scientists took intellectual and physical refuge during the Pinochet dictatorship. When democracy was restored, many of these same researchers went on to senior political and administrative positions.

In the same way, in 1986 Canada's official relations with South Africa were based on outspoken opposition to apartheid and a call for sanctions — including an

academic boycott. Amid the growth of independent organizations in the country, and the national and international momentum of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, IDRC reconsidered its own strategy. In 1988, IDRC made the promotion of democracy and development in South Africa a priority.

Later — with the knowledge and consent of the Mass Democratic Movement in South Africa and the African National Congress in exile, as well as of Canada's government — IDRC funded research on health, economic strategy, urban issues, the environment, and science and technology. It also co-sponsored several workshops in which members of the democratic movement came together to discuss policy options for a new government. Ultimately, IDRC established a regional office in South Africa in 1992. Its support through the political and economic transition out of apartheid enabled Canada to operate outside the confines of strict diplomatic channels.

The work supported by IDRC in South Africa eventually provided the basis for post-apartheid policies on the environment, health systems, urban issues, economic and industrial strategies, and science and technology. South Africa's president, Nelson Mandela, made a point of thanking IDRC specifically when he visited Canada in 1998. IDRC, he said, "played a crucial role in helping the African National Congress and the Mass Democratic Movement to prepare for negotiations (and) was instrumental in helping us prepare for the new phase of governance and transformation."



CP-T. HANSON

South Africa's President Nelson Mandela is welcomed by Canada's Parliament.

### Lasting initiatives

As a result of its proven sensitivity to diplomatic concerns and recognition of its convening power, IDRC was invited to host meetings of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (the Brandt Commission), and of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission). The archive for the 1987 Brundtland report, *Our Common Future*, resides at IDRC. IDRC also organized the V International Conference on AIDS in Montreal in 1989.

In response to the worsening of sub-Saharan African economies during the 1980s, the Centre sought to expand its work in this part of Africa. In particular it focused on improving research capacity — skills that would strengthen the hand of African officials negotiating with the World Bank and the



CIAI: N. PALMER

### Employment equity for women

Concerns about the status of women employed in Argentina's public sector spurred IDRC-funded studies of work histories and public policies affecting occupational segregation. The research explored how informal practices combined with formal regulations can create working conditions disadvantageous to women.

The data — gathered from 1980 to 1989 — uncovered significant patterns of discrimination in the public sector. The study found that even with similar levels of education and experience, women were less likely than men to occupy senior positions. The research helped sensitize union leaders to these concerns, and informed improvements to Argentina's labour policies affecting women.

International Monetary Fund. This led to the creation in 1988 of the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) to carry out policy-oriented research activities, disseminate findings, train a new generation of African economists, and foster links among scholars and practitioners. AERC was housed at IDRC's Kenya office for many years. Its publications, workshops, seminars, and conferences form the cutting edge of policy formation in Africa to this day.

During this period IDRC adapted many areas of its work. For instance, the early emphasis on improving the livelihoods of rural residents — particularly in the context of agriculture and food security — evolved into a growing attentiveness to urban problems. Interestingly, the new metropolitan focus was driven in part by concern for urban food security, and spurred studies of questions like the role of hawkers and vendors in distribution.

As well, gender issues came to the fore with the establishment in 1987 of a women-in-development unit. And the decade saw a growing recognition of the need for an integrated “ecosystem approaches to human health,” an awareness that later gave birth to a new intellectual discipline called ecohealth.

Another realignment took place in the balance between Centre support for research projects and direct support for post-secondary and postgraduate training. In the beginning IDRC had been reluctant to fund scholarships for scientists — on account of the costs

Research on health has involved community participation. ▶







IDRC/D.D.SING

In China, IDRC-supported researchers look for ways to boost bamboo growth.

involved — but later it recognized the need to boost the management capability of its grant recipients, especially in Africa. In 1983 the Centre established a fellowships and awards division specifically to improve skills in research planning and administration.

IDRC created other lasting initiatives during this era. It forged early links with the People's Republic of China, for example. One outcome was the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan, which became

the first international organization to be based in Beijing. IDRC's MINISIS database management software — developed in 1975 — was by 1980 being used by many countries and institutions to support a wide range of applications: MINISIS still thrives as a privately owned multinational company. And the Centre's support for multidisciplinary networks continued with the Asian Fisheries Social Science Research Network, which flourished from 1983 to the mid-1990s.

In 1988, IDRC's approach was bolstered by the Canadian government's new aid strategy, which made the development of local skills the priority. As the decade ended, Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society, selected IDRC as the first recipient of its 21st Century Award for being the organization anywhere in the world that was “best preparing society for the next century.”

*IDRC will continue to focus its attention on people, will continue to insist that their welfare be the central goal of all Centre projects. Human beings are not only the beneficiaries of development activity, they are the only true engines of the development process.*

— Ivan Head, IDRC president, 1978-1991,  
*IDRC Reports*, October 1980

## The 1990s: Innovation, communication, and Agenda 21

During much of the 1990s, the Canadian government's aid budget experienced a long decline as a result of the general fiscal crisis then facing Canada. IDRC was not spared. In company with many other federal agencies, it suffered several cuts to its resources and staff.

Faced with diminished resources, the Centre rethought its program rationales and delivery mechanisms. During the months leading up to its 20th anniversary, it conducted a comprehensive review to ensure its effectiveness and efficiency. The result was a new Board-approved strategy, "Empowerment through knowledge." This blueprint stressed the need to address global and regional research issues, acquire additional funds from non-traditional sources, emphasize an interdisciplinary approach to research, and expand affiliations in both developed and developing regions. It also highlighted the need to ensure that the products of research are actually used, and to understand "what works" in development research.

*In this new milieu, it is more important than ever to cooperate with developing countries in the pursuit of solutions to the problems they face. This cooperation must include an approach to applied research and access to knowledge that allows these countries to contribute to solving global problems and to participate in worldwide innovation. This kind of cooperation is not an act of charity.*

— Keith A. Bezanson, president, 1991–1997,  
*IDRC Annual Report 1993–1994*



IDRC: G.K. DANSO

Research on urban agriculture has increased food security in communities across Africa.

In March 1993, IDRC adopted a three-year Corporate Program Framework to deliver on its revitalized mandate.

To attract collaborators and funding, IDRC mobilized its special strengths: research for development, an international board, intellectual alliances with researchers in developing countries, and its own organizational flexibility and agility. "Empowerment through knowledge" reiterated IDRC's conviction that development means giving local people the power and the means to fulfill their destinies.

IDRC's work during this period was heavily influenced by Agenda 21, the program that emerged from the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, or the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. IDRC had contributed to UNCED preparations, notably in establishing the Commission on Developing Countries and Global Change and undertaking major studies on options for Canada at



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UNCED. At the conference, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney designated IDRC as Canada’s “prime vehicle” for working with developing countries on implementing Agenda 21.

This special assignment proved an excellent fit: concern for environmental issues had long been implicit in much of the research IDRC funded. Now, this concern became a responsibility. To better meet these goals, IDRC reoriented many of its program activities, and established new core themes, including food systems, biodiversity, health and environment, among others.

Notable in these new directions was an increasing attention to urban issues, such as the availability of clean water and sanitation. IDRC was one of the first international development agencies to recognize the importance of urban agriculture.

During the latter years of the decade, IDRC made great strides in the area of ICTs for development, particularly in Africa. The proliferation of networks and program initiatives had highlighted the need for modern communication tools to help connect IDRC staff and research grantees. Early successes in providing basic technical support informed IDRC’s largest single venture, the Acacia program, which sought to spread these technologies beyond the realm of development practitioners to the broader African community. Acacia and similar initiatives in other world regions prompted IDRC to dedicate a new unit to ICTs for development.

- ◀ Rural telecentres – supported by IDRC – offer the hope of a better life to India’s poor.



IDRC S. MURRAY

### Travelling the information highway

IDRC was one of the first donor organizations to anticipate the “digital divide.” For instance, as early as 1995, it responded to requests from developing countries for help in establishing Internet connectivity. In Mongolia, IDRC introduced software and hardware to launch electronic networking services within the country and links with international systems. These services made use of satellite-based wireless Internet technologies, which proved well-suited to Mongolia’s vast and sparsely populated land. The result: better health care and improved distance education for Mongolians. Lessons learned from these successes informed similar efforts in other Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia, Bhutan, and Vietnam.

All the while the Centre continued to stress the importance of self-assessment, of observing and measuring results, and of gauging the impact of its activities. None of this was clear-cut, by any means. How, for example, even to define what kind and level of “success” will justify continued funding and support for any initiative — was it finding new knowledge? or improving lives? or changing government policy? or boosting the skills of junior researchers? or merely putting scientists in touch with one another? To tackle these thorny questions, in 1992 IDRC created a separate unit for planning and evaluation, and two years later it conducted its first annual corporate evaluation.

## Radical departures

As IDRC marked its quarter-century, it experienced its most dramatic and ambitious change to that date. In response to the 1995 cut in government funding for international development, IDRC not only downsized, but it sought to transform its own institutional structures and even the very manner in which research was conducted.

Traditionally, science has been organized around discrete academic disciplines — economics or chemistry or medicine, for example — that each in its own way seeks to address specific questions. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, however, scientists began to acknowledge the limitations of such a monodisciplinary approach. IDRC proposed instead to institute a new method: first, define the development problem, then consider what combination of scientific disciplines can best come up with solutions — and implement them.

IDRC’s 1996 corporate plan reflected this fresh way of thinking with an innovative institutional structure and the adoption of new research themes. Under the umbrella of six broad topics — food security, equity in natural resource use, biodiversity conservation, sustainable employment, strategies and policies for healthy societies, and information and communication — the Centre now funded research through specific “program initiatives” managed by multidisciplinary teams of staff members.

IDRC undertook this radical realignment toward issue-based programming while handicapped by decreased staff and management levels. As one senior manager summed up this turbulent time: “...many institutions have downsized; some have restructured their operations; and a few have tried to reorient their thinking towards a new paradigm. *Very few have done all three at the same time.*”

Needless to say, the transition was complex and arduous, with countless stumbling blocks. For example, most of the academic institutions that teamed up with IDRC maintained their traditional monodisciplinary structure and outlook, which hindered collaboration. Formerly autonomous scientists were compelled to spend time “learning from one another,” which slowed progress. Decision-making became more complicated. Overall, however, the result was a sharpened and more economical focus on those areas where IDRC already had proven expertise, and a less bureaucratic, more flexible, and more action-oriented system.

IDRC further modified its operations by introducing international “secretariats” — research consortia of several donors that pursue goals in common with

IDRC. Secretariats were able to undertake research that was more ambitious than the Centre — or indeed, any single donor — could pursue on its own. Examples include the Micronutrient Initiative, the Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia, and the International Model Forest Network. Gradually, secretariats demonstrated their potential as incubators for new research that, eventually, might continue independently. Lessons learned from these mechanisms encouraged IDRC to seek more donor collaboration around research that was high-risk and beyond the means of a single funder.

The success of these mechanisms persuaded new donors to collaborate with IDRC. These included the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the UN Development Programme, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and private sector firms such as Microsoft Corporation.

*We are proud to note that the innovative approach to development assistance that defined the Centre at its outset is still at its heart: a conviction that men and women must control their own social and economic destinies; that researchers in developing countries must take the lead in producing knowledge for the benefit of their own communities; and that the acquisition and use of knowledge is key to progress.*

— Maureen O’Neil, president, 1997–2008,  
*IDRC Annual Report 1999–2000*



IDRC/P. BENNETT

### **A strategy for better health**

In Tanzania, an IDRC-supported project has produced a road map for improving health policies and strengthening health systems. The Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project, or TEHIP, was based on simple, cost-effective approaches to planning and managing health services. It aimed to improve health, not so much by spending more, but by spending more effectively, according to where the needs were greatest. TEHIP researchers developed several tools to help district health teams analyze and use information. These tools provided the evidence that enabled the teams to set priorities and allocate resources, rather than merely implement plans imposed from above. TEHIP demonstrated that government health systems can be revitalized by an annual financial investment of an additional 80 cents per capita, along with training of district health managers and front-line health workers. The result: a greater than 40% reduction in the mortality of children aged under five, and a reduced burden of disease.

## 2000+ : Collaboration at home and abroad

At the turn of the millennium, IDRC increasingly focused on finding better ways to translate research results into policy and practice — a goal reflected in its five-year plan. While remaining true to IDRC’s key principles, this plan pointed in new directions, among them an emphasis on governance, an examination of the types of institutional environments that most effectively create knowledge for development, and greater attention to gender issues. Activities clustered around three broad fields of enquiry: environment and natural resource management; ICTs for development; and social and economic equity.

Always alert for new approaches to conducting applied research, in 2001 IDRC embarked on an “exploration,” a program called Research on Knowledge Systems (RoKS). RoKS examined the institutional and policy frameworks governing the production of new knowledge, how knowledge fosters development, and the influence of knowledge on organizational performance. These enquiries echoed IDRC’s preoccupation with “science and technology policy instruments” during the 1970s, and foreshadowed its growing relationships with other Canadian organizations that support science and technology.

RoKS informed a new program area, begun in 2005, called Innovation, Policy, and Science. It sought to strengthen knowledge and institutions in developing countries and at the same time to contribute to Canada’s domestic innovation strategy. This program also signalled a renewed recognition of the importance of the hard sciences in IDRC programming.

## Digital opportunities

IDRC’s long experience in advocating the benefits of ICTs was recognized by Canada’s government when it appointed the Centre’s president as co-chair of the Digital Opportunities Task Force (DOT Force), a committee assembled in 2000 by the G8 major industrialized democracies. The DOT Force was a tool to develop concrete measures to help bridge the international digital divide.

The following year, IDRC was charged with launching the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas, announced by the Canadian government at the Summit of the Americas in Québec City. And in 2003, Canada confirmed a \$12 million contribution to create a centre for connectivity in Africa, managed by IDRC.

In 2008 IDRC opened its Digital Library, giving the international research community admission to its comprehensive collection of research results and documents generated by IDRC-funded projects, IDRC funding recipients, and staff.

IDRC’s plan for 2005–2010 reflected the Centre’s continuing efforts to refine its research directions and ensure their relevance to emerging development issues. The objectives it specified were: to strengthen and help mobilize the local research capacity of developing countries, to foster research that will influence public policies, and to rally additional Canadian resources in support of research.

Researchers in Cambodia and across Asia are implementing community-based monitoring systems to reduce poverty. ▶







WORLD BANK © LYONS

### Job creation through small business

Egypt's private sector has long been dominated by small-scale enterprises. Lacking credit, marketing channels, or the time and resources needed to explore new business approaches or technologies, these farmers, furniture makers, metalworkers, and restaurant owners struggle to earn a living.

Egypt's government recognized that strengthening this sector was critical to boosting employment and exports. In 2000, with help from CIDA and IDRC, it launched the Small and Medium Enterprise Policy Development Project (SMEPol). SMEPol's research and case studies explored how reform of policies, regulations, and legislation can create an atmosphere favourable to small entrepreneurs. Its efforts have paid off with new supportive legislation, for example governing income tax and the tendering of government procurement, and with the opening of "one-stop shops" for business registration and licensing. Perhaps the most promising output has been an action plan for promoting the growth of small enterprises.

### Domestic alliances

In Canada, the Centre continued its collaboration with domestic institutions, especially CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

The internationalization of Canadian research during the decade presented important opportunities for IDRC. In May 2003, for example, the Centre took a determined step forward in forging new links between Canada's research community and the developing world. The Centre's Canadian Partnerships Program, with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, hosted a national roundtable on new directions in international research in Canada, followed by consultations on campuses across the country.

Increased collaboration with Canadian organizations was reflected in other new ventures. The Global Health Research Initiative, for instance, brought together IDRC, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, CIDA, Health Canada, and the Public Health Agency of Canada to develop practical solutions for the health and healthcare problems of low- and middle-income countries. And the International Research Chairs Initiative — a joint endeavour of IDRC and the Canada Research Chairs Program — links eight stellar scientists from the developing world with a Canada Research Chair on a five-year program of research and training.

In 2008, the government announced a new \$50 million Development Innovation Fund to search for breakthroughs in global health and other areas, and named IDRC the lead agency. In 2009, responding to the global food crisis, IDRC and CIDA jointly established the \$62 million Canadian International Food Security Research Fund.

## Global alliances

IDRC's reputation enabled it to expand its cooperation with other donor agencies. Among the prominent organizations that collaborated with the Centre were the United Nations Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Notably, in 2006 IDRC pooled resources with the UK's Department for International Development to conduct an ambitious five-year program of research and skills-building on climate change adaptation in Africa.

Another large multi-donor program, the Think Tank Initiative, started in 2008. IDRC joined with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation on a 10-year, US\$90 million effort to strengthen independent policy research institutions in developing countries by enabling them to better provide sound research that both informs and influences policy.

*Policy-relevant research has contributed significantly to higher economic growth in much of the developing world and to more equitable social policy in many countries. Regional networks are central to this dynamic. They enable experts to learn from each other's research and experience in shaping advice to their own publics and governments.*

— David M. Malone, IDRC president 2008–, *IDRC Annual Report 2008–2009*



IDRC: M. HIBLER

### Brokering consensus on resource management

People have often clashed over the natural resources they need for survival. For many years, IDRC supported research to help communities arrive at inclusive and equitable resource management decisions and institutions. For example, Bolivia's Cochabamba region had been troubled by a long-running "water war." In 2002, a team of local researchers set out to draft a water management law that would be acceptable to all parties — a task at which others had failed dozens of times over many decades. In this instance, dialogue based on solid research brokered consensus. In 2004 Bolivia's government introduced a more equitable irrigation law, settling key disputes. In 2006, further progress was achieved when the country's new government established a water ministry.



## Recognizing excellence

Throughout the 2000s, as in earlier decades, IDRC collaborated with outstanding academics, scientists, and leaders, from both the public and the private sectors, in Canada and elsewhere.

For example, while Argentina and Chile were under dictatorship and South Africa was under apartheid, IDRC supported committed and talented researchers in those countries. After the dictatorships and apartheid collapsed, a number of these experts took up leadership positions in their home governments. They include:

- **Dante Caputo**, Argentina's Minister of Foreign Affairs (1983–1989)
- **Alejandro Foxley**, Chile's Minister of Finance (1990–1994) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (2006–2009)
- **Trevor Manuel**, South Africa's Minister of Finance (1996–2009)

Several researchers supported by IDRC early in their careers later achieved global distinction for their scientific work. Recent awardees include:

- Anthropologist **Gilles Bibeau** received the Prix du Québec, the province's most prestigious scientific award, in 2009. Bibeau's association with IDRC began in the 1970s while he studied traditional African medicine, and continues through the

Teasdale-Corti Global Health Research Partnership Program.

- Indian-born Canadian **Asit K. Biswas** was awarded the 2006 Stockholm Water Prize for his outstanding and multi-faceted contributions to global water resource issues.
- Ethiopian-American plant breeder and geneticist **Gebisa Ejeta** was awarded the 2009 World Food Prize for his contributions to improving sorghum production.
- Indian scientist **Modadugu Gupta** won the 2005 World Food Prize for his work to improve nutrition through the expansion of aquaculture and fish farming in South and Southeast Asia.
- **Yuyun Ismawati** and **Syeda Rizwana Hasan** each won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for 2009. Ismawati was recognized for her work promoting community-based wastewater and solid waste management in Indonesia. Hasan's efforts to tighten regulations for Bangladesh's ship-breaking industry netted her the prize.
- **Vijaya Lakshmi** received India's 2007 National Award for Women's Development through Application of Science and Technology.
- **Mario H. Rodríguez López** of Mexico's National Public Health Institute was named a 2009 Malaria Champion of the Americas by the Pan American Health Organization for his success in eradicating malaria using alternatives to pesticides, and building a health information system in the region.
- American political scientist **Elinor Ostrom** shared the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for her research on managing collective resources.

◀ [IDRC support has helped Mongolia join the digital age.](#)



2009 World Food Prize winner Gebisa Ejeta

- Canadian **Amanda Vincent**, co-founder and director of Project Seahorse International, was a winner of the Yves Rocher Foundation Women of the Earth Award in 2007. Vincent also won a 2006 Chevron Conservation Award for her efforts to protect seahorses around the world.
- Bangladeshi banker **Muhammad Yunus** won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for the microcredit Grameen Bank he founded.

## Next: Knowledge for a connected world

IDRC's history can be regarded as a continuing *conversation* about the best way to carry out development research. Persistent negotiation, experimentation, and fine-tuning have sought to find a balance among alternative approaches.

These alternatives have included, for instance: whether to focus on the needs of rural or urban dwellers; whether to entrench IDRC's objectives and programming in formal plans or to invite people in developing countries to set the priorities; whether to fund short-term projects or to provide core support that will sustain institutions in the long term; and how best to manage the delicate transition from research to policy, knowledge to action, objectivity to engagement.

Few of these difficult choices have been made conclusively. These and similar questions remain unresolved, and such conversations will likely endure as long as the organization exists.

In late 2009, IDRC's Board approved a strategic framework to guide the Centre's research agenda until 2015. While maintaining many of IDRC's core activities, the new framework introduces new thrusts, in keeping with current challenges.

### Some highlights:

In 2007–2008 the world experienced a drastic food crisis, provoking widespread fears about future food security. Thus, agricultural productivity, nutrition, and food security issues are a priority among research themes. Since this and other key development challenges — climate change, energy scarcity, and emerging infectious diseases — have environmental overtones, IDRC

will integrate this work into activities related to the environment and the management of natural resources.

The impacts of climate change are now inevitable and will greatly affect developing countries. The most vulnerable regions are the Arctic, Africa, small islands, dry lands, and Asian mega-deltas. IDRC's work on climate change adaptation will continue in Africa, and extend to Asia and to Latin America and the Caribbean. The Centre will invest in mapping and measuring vulnerability, finding public policies to ensure resilience in the face of climate change, and supporting the shift to cleaner energy.

The key drivers of environmental change are global warming, globally interdependent economies, deforestation, agricultural intensification, and food shortages: all these factors also affect human health. In fact, as many as 13 million deaths could be prevented every year if environments were healthier. Drawing upon the knowledge gathered through its ecohealth research, IDRC's environment and human health research agenda will focus on new and emerging diseases and pandemics. It will concentrate on improving agro-ecosystems to reduce poor health, detecting the environmental and social drivers of infectious diseases, and strengthening ecohealth methods, monitoring, and evaluation.

Clearly, the world's problems are immense. Much effort will be needed to solve them. But if one simple lesson can be drawn from IDRC's first 40 years, it is this: *knowledge works*. Scientific and technical know-how can improve the lives of people in developing countries, often in dramatic ways.



IDRC/J. TAYLOR

IDRC support for microfinance initiatives helps empower women.

*It is through the interaction of ideas, people, and money in development research and policy institutions in Canada and around the world that the Centre puts its precepts into action.*

— *Innovating for Development: Strategic Framework 2010–2015*

## Corporate milestones



IDRC was an early supporter of the international agricultural research centres.

**1970:** Parliament passes the *IDRC Act*. The Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, former Prime Minister of Canada, chairs the inaugural Board of Governors meeting. IDRC's first president is agricultural economist W. David Hopper.

**1971:** IDRC's first regional office opens in Singapore.

**1973:** Louis Rasminsky, former Governor of the Bank of Canada, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.

**1973:** Regional offices open in Bogota and Dakar. The Bogota office moves to Montevideo in 1989.



IDRC was one of the first donors to focus on ICTs.

**1974:** A regional office opens in Beirut. This office moves to Cairo in 1976.

**1975:** A regional office opens in Nairobi.

**1977:** Maurice Strong, former president of CIDA, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.

**1978:** Ivan Head, former senior policy advisor to Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, is appointed president of IDRC.

**1981:** The Hon. Donald S. Macdonald, former Minister of Finance, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.



IDRC support for Chilean researchers endured, even under dictatorship.

**1983:** A regional office opens in New Delhi.

**1985:** Janet M. Wardlaw, former Dean, College of Family and Consumer Studies, University of Guelph, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.

**1991:** Keith A. Bezanson, former Canadian diplomat, is appointed president of IDRC.

**1991:** The Board of Governors approves a four-year corporate strategy "Empowerment through Knowledge."





IDRC: P. BENNETT

Managing water supplies is an IDRC priority throughout the Middle East.

**1992:** A regional office opens in Johannesburg. This office closes in 2001.

**1993:** Following Agenda 21, IDRC gives focus to its strategy by approving a *Corporate Program Framework 1993–1996*.

**1992:** The Hon. Flora MacDonald, former Secretary of State for External Affairs, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.

**1997:** Gordon S. Smith, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.



IDRC: P. BENNETT

With IDRC support, the telecentre movement reached across continents.

**1997:** The Board of Governors approves IDRC's *Corporate Program Framework 1997–2000*.

**1997:** Maureen O'Neil, former president of The North-South Institute, is appointed president of IDRC.

**2000:** The Board of Governors approves IDRC's *Corporate Strategy and Program Framework 2000–2005*.

**2004:** The Board of Governors approves IDRC's *Corporate Strategy and Program Framework 2005–2010*.



IDRC: P. BENNETT

IDRC leads a pan-Asian effort to fight avian flu and other infectious diseases.

**2008:** The Hon. Barbara McDougall, former Secretary of State for External Affairs, is appointed chair of the Board of Governors.

**2008:** David M. Malone, scholar and Canadian diplomat, is appointed president of IDRC.

**2009:** The Board of Governors approves IDRC's *Strategic Framework 2010–2015*.

**2010:** IDRC celebrates its 40th anniversary.

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**About Canada's International  
Development Research Centre**

IDRC supports research in developing countries to promote growth and development. IDRC also encourages sharing this knowledge with policy-makers, other researchers, and communities around the world. The result is innovative, lasting local solutions that aim to bring choice and change to those who need it most.

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