

Formality and Flexibility in Planning for Research: Case of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

presented by
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*Taking ideas from other companies... can also mislead and distract. It can prevent managers from focusing on what is unique to their situation. The result? Managers design a planning process that is a model of professional planning techniques but that fails to add value...
Designing a planning process is more an art than a science.
(Campbell, 1999)*

1. Introduction

Designing a process to develop a research policy or strategic framework must be inspired by the culture and experience of the organisations concerned. And the reality of the contexts in which they operate and the needs of the communities they serve.

Nonetheless, if the experience of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) can inspire the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in developing a regional research policy, we are happy to share reflections and lessons from strategy building at IDRC. In the 1980s, IDRC planning was designed to know if what was being done was done well. Strategic planning at IDRC really started in the 1990s, when its focus became whether the right things were being done.

2. What is IDRC?

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a public cooperation of Canada. It was created in 1970 by a special act of Canadian Parliament to support the development of research in Africa, Asia and Latin America and linkages among researchers in those world regions and in Canada. IDRC promotes interaction, cooperation and mutual learning within and among groups in society in the interest of technological and societal innovation that contributes to equitable and sustainable development.

IDRC is celebrating this year 40 years of support to research. In West and Central Africa, IDRC provides grants to about 100 organizations to conduct research in line with their priorities, African realities, and IDRC's strategic framework. The four thematic areas of concentration are social and

economic policy; science, technology and innovation; agriculture and environment; and health and health systems. Thousands of researchers in Africa have benefited from IDRC support and influenced policy and practice in their countries.

3. Historical perspective of strategic planning at IDRC

Strategic planning at IDRC has been characterized by **formality** and **flexibility** – formal processes for gathering information and insights and flexibility in integrating inputs and adapting processes and plans over time.

During the first decade of IDRC's life, in the 1970s, programming was informed by the vision shared in the inaugural speech to the Board of Governors of IDRC's first president, David Hopper. In the 1980s, a practice of annual planning and policy reviews was adopted, but these focused more on structure than objectives. In the 1990s, IDRC adopted three-year planning and programmatic cycles. It articulated its mission as "Empowerment through Knowledge" and was strongly influenced by the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio. Being associated with Agenda 21 was important to IDRC's survival at the time. Sustainable and equitable development thus became an integral part of programming. In the 20th century, IDRC moved to five-year planning cycles. The 2010-2015 strategic framework is titled "Innovating for Development." This indicates the importance placed at IDRC not only on participatory approaches, but also on innovation pathways that make a difference for the quality of life in Africa and in Canada.

I will describe here the inputs and processes behind these five-year strategy documents, not to suggest that these are best practices, but to open IDRC up as one example of how an organization that provides grants for research goes about determining its priorities and approaches.

4. Why undertake strategic planning and what does it cost?

Strategic planning provides an organization with direction. It helps determine how to invest limited resources to achieve objectives. It also helps create buy-in for strategic directions among staff, stakeholders and other partners. "[A] strategic planning process enables an organization to see around corners in general terms. It provides a pathway, alterable whenever it appears necessary, a fluid instrument for pro-activity." (Coblentz, 2002).

At IDRC, the process of preparing the 2005-2010 strategy document took two years and cost approximately 660 000 Canadian dollars (CAD). It also consumed a lot of staff time and time of members of the Board of Governors. This may seem like a lot of resources. On the other hand, these investments in planning informed research expenditures totalling over 800 million CAD over five years. Thus the planning cost just 0.07% of that amount. The value of the planning and priority-setting process is not just in the production of a strategy document but in the use of the information and insights gathered.

5. Multiple ingredients for planning processes – what lessons?

A multitude of information and perspectives, both internal and external, is added to a cooking pot and stirred to give rise to a final research policy, agenda or strategy document. There is no set recipe for strategic



planning, but with leadership that adds value and good coordination and commitment, a good and appetizing sauce can be concocted. The ingredients going into the last three 5-year strategy documents at IDRC have been background papers and consultations with staff, Board members and experts in the world regions where IDRC is active and in Canada. What has been learned from these strategic planning processes?

One lesson is the utility of having good questions or a learning theme that focus planning on what the organization wants or needs to know at a particular time. For IDRC in 2009, some of the learning was focused around IDRC's "grants plus" business model of providing grants plus mentoring and other non-monetary support – to understand the assumptions underlying the model and its ongoing validity for future programming (Mohan, forthcoming). Planning needs to have a purpose and add value. What the organisation is trying to achieve through planning needs to be clear. The organization's leaders and managers must also add value to the process, as was the case with planning for the 2010-2015 strategic framework at IDRC, just after a new Board chair and new President came on board, in 2007 and 2008 respectively, and brought their insights to bear.

"Each company [or organisation] is trying to create a different kind of value in a different kind of industry [or sector(s)] with different kinds of people... Different chief executives...have different insights into ways to add value. Unless the planning process reflects those differences, it is unlikely to create value. If corporate managers have no clear insights about where the value is, they won't know how to unlock that value through planning. Without purpose built on insight, the planning process becomes little more than an administrative exercise... Such... companies may be better off with no planning process at all rather than a planning bureaucracy. Bad planning actively destroys value [rather than creating it]. It wastes people's time and money. It sends the wrong signals.... It can even lead managers to follow bad advice... All good planning processes are clear about the value they are trying to create - they have well-defined objectives built around the insights and skills of senior corporate managers." (Campbell, 1999)

What can be learned about each of the major inputs into the planning processes for five-year strategic frameworks at IDRC, which might provide insight to other organisations, like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – as it leads the process of preparing a regional research policy?

While **background papers** can be helpful, having too many to digest all at once is difficult and can diminish their value. At IDRC, it was suggested that papers be produced over a period of time. To avoid overly descriptive rather than analytical papers, terms of reference have to ask good questions and the right staff and consultants be recruited to prepare them. One particularly helpful paper for IDRC was on knowledge networks.¹ It affirmed approaches to knowledge building and sharing, capacity building and policy influence and contributed to the decision to continue to support networks and networking of researchers linking with various organizations and processes in society. Another, on trends in international development and implications for IDRC,² was singled out for being thought provoking and informative. Opinion pieces from leading thinkers could also be commissioned in the interest of provoking critical and prospective thinking.

Regional consultations have been part of the last three strategic planning processes at IDRC. IDRC benefited from them as did participants in the consultations insofar as they networked with other colleagues and deepened their understanding of IDRC and research development challenges and opportunities. These consultations are organized around the world with men and women researchers and experts from various sectors to discuss development pathways and inquire about research needs and gaps in their countries and world regions. While the consultations may not

¹ idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/29376/1/118901.pdf

² idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/30419/1/118919.pdf

reveal entirely new themes and priorities, they are useful in making sense of emerging issues and detecting similar concerns from one world region to another. For example, it is in part due to the 2009 regional consultations that university research figures prominently in the 2010-2015 strategic framework. The consultations are also useful in “being connected” and demonstrating openness to perspectives from around the world and proximity and sensitivity to issues emerging on the ground. At the consultations, IDRC is in listening mode but must also provide sufficient information on the organisation and how it perceives the future to elicit meaningful feedback. One critique of the consultations is that participants tend to be fairly like-minded elite. More diversity among participants could be achieved by inviting more youth and, for example, persons from the media.

The West and Central Africa Regional Office of IDRC relies on its **Council of Regional Advisors** to prepare for and participate in regional consultations every five years. In addition, electronic discussions and annual and others meetings are held with the Advisors, who identify emerging development trends and provide other strategic intelligence as well as grounded insights on the implementation of the strategic framework in ways that align with needs in the region.

In an increasingly global world and one in which boundaries are blurring, **consultations in Canada** are increasingly important. While IDRC seeks to better the world by serving “southern” scholars and research priorities, it also links Canadian researchers to counterparts around the world and brings southern perspectives to bear in Canada. Thus staff at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canadian research granting councils and universities, and members of the foreign policy community in Canada are invited to speak to future directions of IDRC.

Views of **staff** are also sought. This happens during meetings at IDRC headquarters in Ottawa, Canada and at each of the six regional offices around the world. Discussions are also undertaken via internet. While program staff are most active in the in-person and virtual discussions, administrative and financial staff also contribute. Such consultation is important in signalling changes and promoting ownership of ongoing and new directions. While many staff refer to the final strategy document when developing action plans, the 2006 (Currie-Alder) review of corporate planning at IDRC revealed that some rely on their recall of discussions and participation in the planning process, which, for them made the document come alive.

Board members are key in strategic planning processes. They need to support the process and also feed into it by commenting various inputs. Member of the IDRC Board of Governors for example suggested inclusion in strategy documents mention of the need, when financing research, to sometimes take calculated risks. Such statements send clear signals to staff, research partners, and financial contributors regarding IDRC’s approach to risk in its work. Board members also proposed the third objective in IDRC’s 2005-2010 strategic plan, which was to leverage additional resources for research for development, beyond the annual contribution from Canadian Parliament. Board members of course also approve the final strategy document.

While it may be interesting to look to other organisations to learn lessons from them, it is most important to coordinate a planning process that rhymes with the realities of a particular organisation and the context in which it operates. As IDRC staff frequently review strategy documents and research policies and plans, it might be interesting to know some of the things they look for.

6. What does IDRC look for in strategic plans and research agendas?

In the 21st century it is learning organisations that are needed, ones that reflect on action and learn from previous experience. Is there evidence in the strategy document of **building on what exists** and

learning from experience? Are there mechanisms for learning over time and investing that learning in the organisation and the implementation of the strategy? Does the strategy document address the state of the sub-region in relation to the state of the world?

Was there a **participatory planning process** in which various stakeholders were able to contribute perspectives? Was the participation diverse and reflective of the communities served by the organisation(s)? i.e. both women and men, youth and adults, rural and urban populations, persons from different socio-economic statuses, geographic areas, ethnic backgrounds, and political perspectives?

Is the plan or research agenda **focused, forward-looking, and feasible?** Is there evidence of strategic choices regarding how to invest efforts? Are these aligned with emerging needs and aspirations of people in the region? What value will be added to existing activities and approaches? Does it seem likely that what is proposed will improve quality of life? Does the breadth reflect available human and financial resources and organizational capacities?

If an organisation is being considered for funding, IDRC also looks at how the plan links up with IDRC's objectives and strategic framework and the activities and priorities of its program initiatives. At the same time, IDRC remains open and responsive to idea emanating from various research communities.

7. Conclusion

Strategic planning processes are organic and unique to each organisation. They must be developed over time in relation to organizations' specific cultures and contexts. The time and effort invested is justified when the information and insights gathered help the organisation "see into the future," set priorities, and travel promising pathways to meet its mandate.



The process is as important as the document that results. The process builds ownership for strategic direction among staff, Board members and other partners. It also raises the profile of the organisation and shows it open to multiple perspectives, including, hopefully, critical ones. Finally, the process is a learning one, which should not stop once objectives and priorities have been documented. At IDRC an evaluative culture including internal and external reviews ensures that reflection on action and learning from practice are constantly fed into the implementation of the strategy.

Strategic planning and research agenda setting at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been characterized by neither heaviness nor lightness and by both formality and flexibility – formal processes to ensure that grounded intelligence is harnessed and flexibility in using it in the development and implementation of strategies. Strategies at IDRC are also characterised by continuity and change – continuity to be able to work over the long term and make an impact and change so as to constantly adjust and adapt to evolving global and local contexts and aspirations.

8. References

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