CORPORATE STRATEGY AND EVALUATION DIVISION

Excellence in the context of use-inspired research: Perspectives of the global South (Executive Summary)

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IDRC's Strategic Evaluation on Research Excellence aims to define and articulate what research excellence means in a research for development context, analyze tools and approaches for evaluating research excellence, and identify innovations that could be tested. The first phase of the strategic evaluation consisted of reviewing existing literature as well as internal and external practice on research excellence. In addition to this output, three others were produced in the first phase: Review of Key Debates (Méndez), Understanding Research Excellence at IDRC (Ofir and Schwandt), and Review of Existing Frameworks (Coryn et al.).

IDRC has launched a strategic evaluation to answer the question "What is research excellence in the context of research for development?" IDRC funds research intended to generate learning and change. It supports Southern organizations in delivering high-quality ideas, understandings, and solutions to advance development through new knowledge. This study, conducted by Amaltas,[1] provides a preliminary understanding of how Southern researchers view research excellence and how their experiences can inform the creation of a framework for the assessment of research excellence at IDRC.

IDRC's Strategic Framework 2010-2015 states: "Knowledge and innovation . . . remain core tools for empowerment. As such, they are critical ingredients in the quest for greater prosperity, security, and equity. . . . IDRC firmly believes that in assisting its research partners to produce, disseminate, and apply new knowledge, it can contribute to positive change in the developing world." The space that IDRC-funded research occupies can be referred to as Pasteur's Quadrant, a term first used by Donald Stokes in 1997.[2] Stokes proposed that research can be classified along a two-axis frame, where one axis represents 'quest for fundamental understanding' and the other 'considerations of use.' He suggested that researchers who consider both use and contribution to knowledge could be represented by Louis Pasteur. This worldview has ramifications for the research excellence framework that IDRC might apply and the lens through which it might review work that it funds.

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[1]Amaltas is a research and consulting organization based in Delhi, India. Amaltas's mission is to work in the development sector to provide high-quality research and consulting services directed to accelerate improvements in the lives of people.

[2] D.E. Stokes. *Pasteur's Quadrant: Basic Science and Technological Innovation*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC. 1997.

Figure 1. A Typology of Research per Stokes (1997)
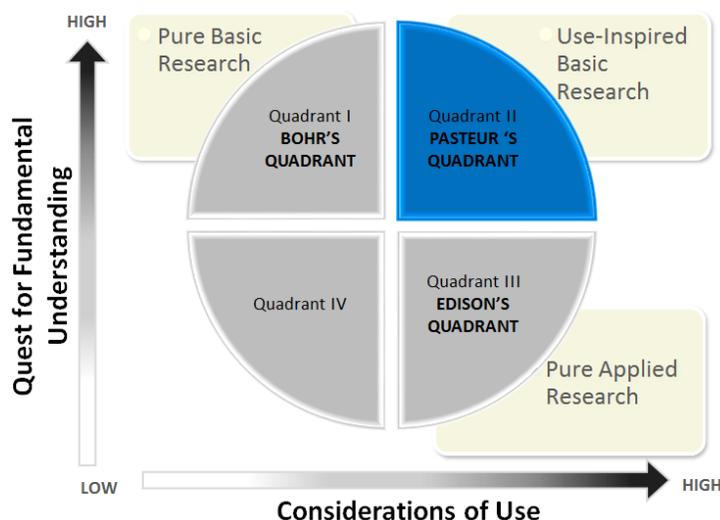
Study objectives and methodology

The nature of this study is exploratory; it aims to derive an understanding of what researchers working on real world problems of the global South think of research excellence. It was designed as a three-part study, with each sub-study adding greater depth to the information previously collected.

The study included three tools:

1. General survey: A web-based survey distributed to former and present grantees of IDRC and former grantees of the Global Development Network (GDN). This survey serves as the major source of quantitative data for the study. (The response rate was 34% for IDRC and 17% for GDN; there were 301 responses in total.)

2. Innovators survey: A web-based questionnaire distributed to research grantees identified as 'innovators' on research excellence. (17 participants)

3. Key informant interviews: Ten of the innovators were interviewed on the major issues emerging from the surveys. These interviews were a rich source of nuanced qualitative information.

One challenge of this study was defining the global South. IDRC and GDN grantees are engaged to carry out research in the global South; however, some grantees are in fact located in Northern countries. Over three-fourths of the respondents to the general survey were born and reside in the global South, yet the majority of respondents (69%) had completed their last degree in the North. The line between what is a 'Southern view' and what is not may be considerably blurred.

Implications of Southern researcher perspectives

The multidisciplinary nature of the research grants, the lively debates about the definition of research excellence, and the lack of consensus on appropriate indicators create challenges for the construction of a framework to assess the excellence of IDRC-supported research.

The definition of research excellence and the parameters used to measure it vary with the mandate of the institution and the purpose of the evaluative process itself. This is linked to calls for research with policy or practice at its heart to be judged differently from research for academic outputs. IDRC needs to consider whether it wishes to bolster existing institutional incentives or attempt to change them through its research excellence framework. This is a policy position that needs to be determined prior to construction of a framework.

Findings of the surveys and the interviews were used to derive implications for IDRC in its thinking about a research excellence framework. Several main concepts were identified: the debate on definitions of research quality and research excellence; the pertinence of relevance and impact to conceptualizations of research excellence; less universally accepted parameters such as innovation; views on ethics and metrics; and the need for cross-disciplinary frameworks and flexibility in evaluation.

- *Research quality or research excellence*: Respondents showed equal attention to the need to focus on research process issues and on political ones[3] in assessments of research excellence in their Southern use-inspired research contexts. Some argued that research quality is an epistemological issue, while research excellence incorporates analysis that presents meaningful results and introduces new data and findings to a policy discourse. Respondents felt that research should not only provide credible findings that are viewed as valid and fair, but also results that have application to practice and/or policy in the complexity of the real world.

- *Relevance:* The idea of relevance emerged as an important marker of research excellence. Most calls for increasing the relevance of research were related to its relevance to clearly discernible development needs within the researchers' particular contexts. Southern researchers feel strongly about the need for the research to be relevant to topical concerns, to users of the research, and to the communities where change is being sought. Key informants felt that relevance was an issue that required attention in frameworks designed to evaluate the excellence of the research.

- *Impact:* Impact—its definition and measurement—is a contested issue in both the literature reviewed and the findings of this study. Several respondents felt that researchers should be held accountable for developing and executing pre-determined plans for dissemination and influence, but, because they have little control over other stakeholders and their priorities, they cannot be responsible for the absorption of evidence into policy or for behaviour change that is the hallmark of social change. A framework to assess research excellence in IDRC-supported research might therefore try to gauge the extent to which researchers know their context and are able to translate that into knowledge translation strategies in the research proposal.

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[3] This refers to the power dynamics of the relationship between those who are the subjects of research and the wider context in which those stakeholders live. This power dynamic is an important determinant of research use.

- *Innovation:* Survey and interview respondents exhibited strong support for originality and innovation as a change they would like to see in the assessment of research excellence. The accent on innovation may be of particular interest given that IDRC's current Strategic Framework places knowledge and innovation at the core of the work that IDRC funds.

- *Ethics:* A low representation of ethics as an aspect used to assess research excellence in routine evaluations came as a surprise given the settings in which the researchers work and the grounded nature of their work. Interestingly, research design was more commonly included in routine evaluations of research excellence by South-based researchers (65% versus 54%) and ethics was more emphasized by North-based researchers (50% versus 29%). Researchers perceive that the value IDRC puts on ethics was higher compared to any other funder.

- *Metrics*: When asked to identify the indicators by which their research should be evaluated, respondents to the general survey chose bibliometric and citation counts. This despite the fact that the same respondents had listed relevance, influence, and impact most often in the list of parameters of research excellence that they thought should be used. Clearly, despite widely held views on limitations of bibliometric methods to assess research excellence, respondents simply fell back on these as currently used indicators of excellent research.

- *Cross-disciplinary frameworks*: Neglect of grey literature in favour of codified production of literature in scholarly journals is a drawback of traditional research evaluation. Grey literature is often of cardinal importance in interdisciplinary work and for innovative developments.[4] This is of particular concern given that about 95% of the survey respondents are engaged in multidisciplinary research. An IDRC framework must find a way to account for and recognize the influence that grey literature might wield, and it must allocate value to new methodologies and evolve common standards for newer disciplines and multidisciplinary modalities.

- *Flexibility in evaluation*: While excellence can be seen as research that is 'publication-ready,' respondents also reported that research is excellent when it 'addresses relevant, complex social questions in ways that results in usable evidence for policy and practice.' Evaluative frameworks must be open to account for these contrasting realities. The IDRC framework needs to be sufficiently flexible to account for the challenging environments and evolving situations that researchers face when tackling issues of the real world.

Construction of a framework for the assessment of research excellence at IDRC

As Southern researchers are IDRC's partners in using research to accelerate development, their voices keep IDRC grounded in the realities of research for development. This study provides a rich trove of data from which to derive several important lessons for the development of a framework for assessment of research excellence.

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[4] OECD. The Evaluation of Scientific research: Selected Experiences. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Paris. 1997.

IDRC has a series of geographically-dispersed, innovative, and locally-relevant programs designed to yield practice and/or policy outcomes, operating on numerous, non-synchronized timelines. This poses a particular *problématique* that requires both a framework response as well as a structural response.

The framework response needs to capture attributes of excellence consonant with the ideals that IDRC would like to nurture. The framework will help emphasize the values that IDRC champions by directing funding to research that conforms to these values and encourages grantees to apply them to other research work they undertake. The framework also requires a structural response. This means that the system through which the framework is applied has to work across diverse geographies and projects in diverse and multiple disciplines that are attempting to develop multiple forms of influence and impact. In addition, the system must have the capability to aggregate results to meet organizational reporting needs.

Suggestions for the construction of an IDRC framework are presented below.

1. The use-inspired research that IDRC funds is, by definition, concerned with applicability to local realities and is expected to have consequences on social and political realities.

Southern researchers emphasized relevance and stakeholder involvement and were unanimous in their view that rigour and scientific merit are valid parameters with which to assess the excellence of research. Southern researchers see themselves as contributing to a body of learning that is rooted in good research practice, which is reliable, and thus valuable. At the same time, there was strong and widespread support for attention to influence and impact in frameworks for research excellence. Researchers also pointed out that influence takes place at various levels and through various interlocutors. Respondents acknowledged that gathering evidence of influence is difficult, yet they argued that frameworks for research excellence could take account of intended influence plans. The framework may need to recognize the length of time that impact can take to manifest.

2. A framework that addresses research excellence, not only research quality, is needed.

The analysis of the study findings and relevant literature suggests that the debate over research excellence and research quality is influenced by the perspective being used; namely, is it methodological or political? Both perspectives are legitimate in the contexts in which IDRC grantees work. (See figure 2 on page 6.)

At one level, research quality/excellence is a matter of process—of seeing that scientific merit is not compromised and that the research and the researchers interact with, and are seen as credible by, the larger community of researchers. At another level, and related to the use-inspired nature of the work that IDRC funds, research quality/excellence is a political question that describes the power relationship between the research and the wider world. Is the research relevant to an experienced reality? Does it have an audience outside academia and does it reach this audience? What is the scope of its influence? How do the results of the research affect the lived reality?

Figure 2. Research excellence encompasses research quality

Ideally, a framework will recognize the validity of documentation and dissemination of findings in non-English-language briefing and other materials. It must recognize non-academic forms of communicating results and their use in multiple ways to address practice and policy. Owing to incentives for certain ways of reporting (e.g., peer-reviewed journal publications in university settings), researchers might themselves inadequately address influence and impact. Contextually effective ways of reporting could strengthen knowledge translation; these should be fully explored and supported through the use of appropriate parameters and indicators of research excellence.

3. The framework must address the scope and diversity of questions that IDRC-funded researchers tackle.

IDRC funding supports a diverse set of research projects across a variety of domain specializations. This poses particular challenges for research excellence evaluation, including the need to define parameters and indicators that best capture the perspective, context, and needs of the research done by IDRC's Southern grantees.

Much of IDRC-supported work is multi-, inter-, or transdisciplinary and is sometimes evolutionary. Research questions, design, and methods evolve as the situation unfolds and research projects absorb and respond to the challenges of the real world. The framework requires the flexibility to take note of the evolution of research questions in dynamic real world situations, and needs to build in a degree of reflexivity that allows for changes in design and timelines.

4. The purpose of the evaluation will determine the 'unit of account' and the phases of the research cycle at which it should be carried out.

IDRC must define the level (e.g., research output, project, program, etc.) at which it is evaluating research excellence. Is the purpose to assess the quality of each research project, of each program, or at a higher organizational level?

It may be worthwhile to unbundle the research cycle into phases that are of interest for evaluation, incorporating both implementation and the ends to which it is supported. For example, at the project

level, the pre-grant phase could be used to assess the conceptualization of the grant, its relevance to local realities, and its consonance with IDRC's mandate; evaluation of the grant implementation phase could yield information on the scientific merit of the research project, its rigour, and its embeddedness within the community; and the post-grant phase could yield information on the post-project influence and impact. Assessment of the pre-grant phase could be based on the research proposal, the grant implementation phase on self-assessment and program staff reporting, and the post-grant phase on external peer review and partner reporting. Each phase could assign weights to various parameters at different stages of the research cycle.