

Understanding Research Excellence at IDRC: Executive Summary

By Zenda Ofir and Tom Schwandt, December 2012

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), *Review of Existing Frameworks* (Coryn et al.), and *Review of Southern Researcher Perspectives* (Singh et al.).

This review is one of four studies in the [strategic evaluation of research excellence](#) undertaken in 2012 by the Corporate Strategy and Evaluation Division (formerly the Evaluation Unit) in order to assist IDRC in better defining, strengthening, and achieving excellence in research for development. The focus of this study is to better understand IDRC staff members' definitions of, and approaches to, assessing research excellence. For this purpose, in addition to drawing from a literature study and a number of relevant IDRC documents, the review team interviewed 38 staff members, including vice-presidents, directors, program leaders, and program specialists across four program areas as well as from the Donor Partnership Division and the Corporate Strategy and Regional Management Branch.

Context

In the broad research and research policy-shaping community that includes universities, not-for-profit firms, think tanks, and influential funders of research, *research excellence* is a contested notion conceptually and practically. There is no single agreed-upon definition of the term (nor is there agreement on the meaning of such related terms as *research use*, *relevance*, or *impact*). Virtually every criterion and associated measure or indicator that has been put forward as a component of research excellence has been criticized and found wanting in some respect. Defining and measuring research excellence is made even more problematic in the research for development community given strongly-held views about the unique aims, purposes, ethical commitments, and values of such research.

IDRC operates in an environment characterized by these discussions. Moreover, IDRC both influences and is influenced by the research excellence discussion. The position that IDRC takes on the matter and how that relates to its grants-plus philosophy, its commitment to research capacity building, and its interactions with the perspectives of other influential donor partners and grantees is thus strategically important.

Definitions of Research Excellence at IDRC

IDRC staff expressed multiple and contested views of research excellence that mirror the wider discussion. This is not surprising, given that IDRC engages in many kinds of research and development activities across a variety of problem areas, disciplines, and geographic regions, and draws its personnel from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and fields of practice.

The staff members interviewed identified a variety of aspects they would include in a definition of research excellence, such as:

- the scientific merit or technical quality of the research;
- ethical conduct;
- research effectiveness (understood as use, influence, and impact);
- relevance for development;
- innovativeness; and
- excellence in the entire process of research, from problem identification and definition to research design, involvement of relevant partners and other stakeholders, research management, and communication that ensures reach and visibility and increases research use.

Some of these dimensions (in particular scientific merit, technical quality, ethical conduct, relevance for development, innovativeness, and excellence in project conceptualization and design) are within what can broadly be understood as the “sphere of control” of IDRC and its grantees – that for which its staff can be viewed as directly accountable. Others (including research use, influence, and impact) are less so. This has implications for how IDRC may approach a definition of, and assessment strategies for, research excellence.

Factors influencing the way IDRC understands research excellence

Many factors influence the way research excellence is understood at IDRC. Most important among them are the values and culture of IDRC, an individual’s particular field of work at IDRC, and an individual’s discipline. Views of Southern (rather than Northern) research partners had a somewhat less but still significant influence. IDRC corporate documentation (with a few exceptions such as the recently revised and approved suite of assessment and

reporting documents, and the external program reviews), the views of funding partners, and other external factors were seen as much less influential for assessment purposes.

There is also evidence of the understanding of research excellence being influenced by programming changes as priorities and modalities evolve, and by the extent to which individuals and teams are able or driven to challenge conventional approaches to measuring research excellence (such as bibliometrics and journal rankings).

This means that IDRC's approach to its mission – which determines its grants-plus modalities – is critical to how staff views research excellence. Any evolution in IDRC strategies that inadvertently or intentionally leads to a strategic shift may therefore have a significant influence on how research excellence is defined and assessed.

Assessing research excellence at IDRC

There is a broadly-shared conversation within, and sometimes across, IDRC teams about research excellence. However, there is a lack of general agreement on what research excellence entails and, consequently, how it should be assessed and documented.

Although a range of practice is evident at IDRC, the assessment of research excellence is primarily a matter of front-end appraisal and shaping of projects. Projects are monitored and useful information is collected during implementation, mostly using narratives without a focus on systematic synthesis. This, coupled with the extensive use of peers and peer review in various forms – including within networks aimed at sharing and mentoring— shows an emphasis by staff on the *strengthening of processes that lead to research excellence*, rather than a singular focus on the end result of these processes (especially as far as the use, influence, and impact of research is concerned, where assessment is particularly challenging).

This is a useful and credible approach, but staff struggle to articulate and prove success in achieving research excellence at different stages in the lifetime of a grant or project. In the absence of timely and synthesized monitoring data, they may also not fully use opportunities for learning and adaptive management. Research excellence as a matter of front-end appraisal is thus necessary, but not sufficient.

Much of the focus on assessing research excellence exists at the project level. However, this focus needs to be complemented with an interrogation of the extent to which assessing research excellence at the program portfolio level might also be desirable.

Finally, many of the tensions inherent in IDRC's mission and ways of working, described in Patrizi & Patton's 2009 report¹ on IDRC strategy, are reflected in how staff members make decisions about research excellence assessment practices. They continue with their balancing

¹Read the report [here](#).

act in different ways to ensure research excellence as an endpoint amidst a range of factors influencing each trajectory.

Recommendations

At least two important steps are required if IDRC is to develop actionable knowledge—that is, useful understandings and practices for cultivating research excellence from project inception, during monitoring and learning as the project unfolds, and in judging research excellence in projects upon completion:

1. Developing a common language for research excellence built around a set of basic markers for both scientific merit and scientific integrity; and
2. Developing an understanding of, and procedures for assessing, research excellence as a *process* of monitoring knowledge development, rather than as a static end-point achieved “once and for all.”

Linked to these two steps, IDRC also needs to consider how it can best put processes or systems in place that will:

3. Help assess its efforts to strengthen the chance that the research will reach and engage potential users effectively; and
4. Help understand and assess the medium-term influence and long-term impact of the research it funds – in other words, that which is not within its “sphere of control.”

Please contact Colleen Duggan (cduggan@idrc.ca) or Amy Etherington (aetherington@idrc.ca) to learn more about IDRC’s strategic evaluation on research excellence.