Towards Research Excellence for Development: The Research Quality Plus (RQ+) Assessment Instrument

Executive Summary

IDRC’s Strategic Evaluation on Research Excellence aims to define and articulate what research excellence means in a research for international development context, analyze tools and approaches for evaluating research excellence, and identify innovations that could be tested. The final phase of the strategic evaluation consists of the articulation, testing and application of actionable frameworks and tools for evaluation.

Purpose and rationale

This document presents a framework and practical guidelines for assessing the quality of research for development. Referred to as the Research Quality Plus (RQ+) assessment instrument, most immediately it will serve as a tool to guide the work of external evaluators hired by IDRC as part of the external review process for prospectus-based research programs.

The RQ+ instrument is the result of an intellectual collaboration between IDRC’s internal evaluation team and evaluators Zenda Ofir and Thomas Schwandt. It is also meant to push forward the debate on research quality assessment and become a useful contribution to others facing the challenging task of research evaluation.

RQ+ is based on the premise that a credible, balanced and comprehensive assessment of the quality of research for development requires the consideration of elements beyond research outputs only, or the use of conventional metrics. These additional elements include important aspects of the research process related to design, execution and the sharing of findings. For this reason, RQ+ indicates an approach that straddles output and research project assessment.

RQ+ is designed to provide external reviewers with a more systematic approach for answering a key question posed in IDRC prospectus-based external program reviews:

“Overall, was the quality of the research supported by the program acceptable? Assess the main research outputs produced by a sample of completed projects in order to judge the overall research quality and the significance of the research findings to the field of study/research area. Take into account:

i. Methodological and scientific standards
ii. The context in which the research was conducted and disseminated
iii. The intended purpose of the research
iv. Potential for application to policy and/or practice
v. Any other influential factors.”
The design of RQ+ was influenced by the following considerations about the nature of the research that IDRC funds and what the organisation values as a research donor:

1. IDRC funds primarily use-inspired research that has unique features:
   - Problem-focused and solution-oriented, based on local priorities
   - Policy relevant
   - Multi-, inter- or trans-disciplinary, sometimes across disparate fields
   - Primarily using mixed methods
   - Addresses complex and integrative problems, requiring systems-based approaches
   - Sensitive to, respectful of, and including local voices, knowledge and contexts in the global South, and
   - Displays sensitivity to risk for vulnerable individuals and societies, and fragile institutions, systems and contexts.

2. IDRC provides research for development support that involves:
   - Strengthening research capacities of individuals and institutions, often through long-term investments
   - Taking risks, for example by supporting entirely new fields of work, engaging with complex regional or global challenges, and supporting work in conflict-ridden, poverty-stricken or institutionally weak environments
   - Encouraging knowledge generation in and for the global South
   - Facilitating research networks, research to policy linkages and access to resources
   - Building constituencies and networks for change
   - Targeting changes in policies, practices, institutional systems and technologies, and
   - Partnering as mentor, advisor, peer and/or broker.

3. IDRC believes excellence in research for development includes both technical quality and research effectiveness

IDRC believes that excellent research has technical or scientific merit (e.g., methodologically sound, empirically warranted conclusions) and is effective, where the latter refers to use, influence, policy

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relevance, “relevance for development”, actionable knowledge, or impact. It understands that technical quality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an overall determination of research excellence. Yet IDRC as a research funder also recognizes that the assessment of research quality focused on what is within its sphere of control is critical, in addition to its typical emphasis on evaluating outcomes in the sphere of influence. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. The spheres of control, influence and interest in the assessment of research excellence

As shown in Figure 1, technical quality of research is within the direct control of IDRC as a funder of research and its research partners. However, the uptake, use, influence and impact of research move out of their spheres of direct control because of the interaction of multiple actors, agencies, and socio-political circumstances.²

RQ+ holds IDRC and its research partners accountable for what they can reasonably and realistically control. It holds them accountable for taking steps to increase the likelihood that the research will be used - in other words, for positioning the research findings for influence and impact.

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² An IDRC Program Prospectus spans five years. This means that while outputs are most often achieved, there are fewer outcomes and impacts. For this reason prospectus-based external program reviews tend to focus on outputs and outcomes. IDRC’s evaluation system includes other evaluation approaches and designs (case study, impact studies, etc.) in order to capture and evaluate longer term results.
Thus, this instrument is a guide to assess the technical quality of the research IDRC funds in light of the way that research is designed and positioned for uptake and use; hence, the label, “RQ+.”

The RQ+ Assessment Framework

The assessment instrument is based on the RQ+ Assessment Framework, which encompasses three components:

1. Key influences that have significant potential to effect the quality of research for development. These need to be taken into account as part of the assessment.
2. Dimensions and sub-dimensions that characterize research quality, as relevant in the context of IDRC-funded research for development.
3. Ratings on a scale defined by rubrics, to indicate the level at which a project performs per dimension or sub-dimension.

Figure 2. The IDRC RQ+ Assessment Framework for Research for Development
The RQ+ Assessment Instrument

The RQ+ assessment involves four primary activities:

Step 1. Selecting the Research Projects in the Portfolio

Most IDRC program portfolios consist of too many grants and outputs for a comprehensive assessment of the research performance of all. In fact, a number of grants in a portfolio are additions to existing research projects, such as funding for events, training opportunities, evaluation, and so on. Thus, a sample of projects primarily devoted to conducting and producing research has to be selected for closer examination.

This will require a study of strategic program documents and project grant proposals. A discussion with the IDRC program teams will also be helpful to understand how the program was conceptualized and how the program portfolio evolved over time. The external review team will be expected to record and defend the rationale for their project selection.

Step 2. Characterizing the Research Projects

Once a sample of projects has been assembled, reviewers should attempt to characterize these considering the key influences outlined in figure 2 above. Identification of key influences are meant to ground the assessment in a reflection of contextual and risk factors and serve two purposes: (1) to define the program portfolio by identifying project clusters according to the types and levels of key influences for each project; and (2) to understand better the performance along a certain trajectory towards high performance in the quality or effectiveness of the research.

Step 3. Rating the Research Quality

The instrument for rating the quality of research in each project consists of four dimensions (some with sub-dimensions) rated on an 8-point scale from “unacceptable” to “Very Good.” Ratings are based on the examination of relevant evidence. It may be that in some cases, reviewers judge that a particular sub-dimension is not applicable to the project in question. When this is the case, reviewers are asked to record a full assessment, based on their expert knowledge, of why this sub-dimension is not applicable (e.g., gender responsiveness, etc.) Similarly, there may be cases in which there is not enough information available to make a credible assessment of a sub-dimension. In either case, no numerical rating will be assigned.

Sources of evidence for the assessment in each dimension may include project documentation (e.g., Project Approval Document, Progress Monitoring Report, Project Completion Report, Final Technical Report, etc.), research outputs (e.g., research articles including peer reviewed and other publications, policy briefs, research reports, conference papers, final technical reports), and
interviews with IDRC program staff, research project leaders or research team members (grantees), and where appropriate, external stakeholders.

**Step 4. Synthesizing the Ratings**

Aggregating research project ratings to arrive at a portfolio level assessment will be challenging. Care needs to be taken to ensure that over all numeric ratings are underpinned by strong qualitative narratives. The rubrics provided above are meant to encourage clear performance language and criteria and to help balance these two types of judgement. The ratings for each research dimension can used and synthesized to provide an assessment of the program portfolio. It can be done per dimension or sub-dimension, or across the dimensions.

**Early testing and application**

The RQ+ instrument was tested in early 2014 via four simultaneous but independent simulations. The simulations involved the application of the RQ+ instrument to a sample of IDRC research projects carried out between 2005 and-2010. Testing was done by four former external IDRC reviewers who are familiar with the IDRC and its external review process. The simulations provided detailed feedback on a wide range of issues including whether the framework enables a fair assessment across different types of research programs or how appropriate it is for research that:

- has different intentions (to influence social change versus technological development);
- is targeted to different contexts (local/regional versus global problems);
- aims to influence different user communities (policy actors versus scientific or academic audiences)

RQ+ is now being applied in seven external program reviews taking place over 2014 and 2015. IDRC expects to make further adjustments as a result of learning that emerges from those experiences.

*Please contact IDRC’s Policy and Evaluation Division to learn more about the research excellence strategic evaluation.*