A HISTORY OF RESPECT

An interview with Rex Nettleford on IDRC’s first 10 years

The Hon. Rex M. Nettleford, O.M., is Director of Extra-Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, and advisor to the Jamaican Prime Minister on cultural affairs. A founding member of IDRC’s Board of Governors, he served on the Board during the Centre’s first 10 years. He was interviewed for Reports by Ian Boyne, a feature writer with the Jamaican Agency for Public Information and Sunday Sun newspaper.

Reports: What were the conditions that led to the creation of IDRC?
Nettleford: “I think it has to be seen in the context of the disappointing record of the first development decade, where the projected recipients of assistance from the developed world turned out to be the least of the beneficiaries, and, in fact, much of the help given to the Third World did not really reach the mass of the population. This, of course, was clearly understood and seen in the 60s to the extent that the Pearson Commission was set up in 1969 under the auspices of the World Bank and the chairmanship of the late Lester B. Pearson. That produced a watershed report in the literature of development strategies.1

My suspicion is that Mr Pearson was impelled to return home and try to get something done as a result of that report. His tremendous influence in the Canadian political system at the time was brought to bear on the political directorate there and, together with people like Maurice Strong, they came up with this mechanism, the International Development Research Centre, which was designed, modestly, to plug some of the gaps that had resulted from the first development decade.

“The composition of this rather odd body was quite unprecedented in the history of developmental systems in that, although the entire thing was funded by the Canadian taxpayer, they included some 10 non-Canadians on the Board of Governors, people from the Third World largely, as well as from those countries that have had a long tradition of relationships with the developing world.”

Reports: What were the objectives of IDRC during those first few years?
Nettleford: “Broadly speaking, the way we like to put it is this: humanizing development systems to put emphasis on human resources and, above all, to build up the research capabilities of people within the developing world so that decisions are taken by their own people, in their own self-interest. And to determine their own destinies, they would be informed by a body of knowledge which is within their grasp and whose formulation would be their responsibility. So it means that from the simplest form of action research — data gathering even — to the most sophisticated, the involvement of developing peoples would be encouraged with a view to policy decisions.

“Everybody takes this for granted now because that early IDRC resolve and orientation, although unique to IDRC and revolutionary in 1970, has now become the common stock and capital, if you like, of many development assistance agencies.

“IDRC was lucky enough to have as its first chief executive a fantastic human being, David Hopper, who brought a wealth of experience from his own involvement in the so-called Green Revolution in India. As an agricultural economist he had a tremendous knowledge of development strategies, of scientific knowledge as it applies to development strategies in the Third World.

“He gathered around him a most effective professional staff, many of whom had gained a lot of experience, certainly on how not to do things from the very failures of the first development decade. So in that sense, the first development decade was not totally a failure because it bred a number of people who, through their insight, their own creative imagination, and their skill, could see what went wrong. Now they had an institution to put them right, supported by a Board of Governors I remember to be very enlightened, very carefully chosen. The Canadians

The Hon. Rex M. Nettleford of Jamaica
The capabilities so that developing countries can be counterproductive.

"From the very beginning, we set ourselves tasks and subjected ourselves to a kind of seminar or tutorial session where we literally looked at the problems as they presented themselves. We decided that, of course, we should concentrate on aiding the world's poorest, and that emphasis should be placed on rural development, specifically in such areas as agriculture, food, nutrition, population and health sciences, social sciences and human resource development and, not long after, information sciences. Since then, science and technology policy has been added and developed, and energy is now being seriously considered. But the concentration on these areas we felt should guarantee the benefits of self-reliance, self-discovery, self-help among the large mass of people in the world."

Reports: A major criticism of Western institutions is that they largely ignore the poor or the bottom 40 percent of the population. Is the IDRC exempt from this criticism?

Nettleford: "By large and large. But the IDRC is very sensible. It has not indulged in the trendy mode of looking for 'the poorest of the poor' because that in itself can be counterproductive.

The important thing is that it recognizes the need to build up expertise in areas of intellectual knowledge and research capabilities so that developing countries in turn can be in control of the knowledge, because those who own the information own a very important means of production."

"Of course no IDRC or other outside agency can go into another political jurisdiction and dictate what is to be done. This is one of the reasons why emphasis has been placed, quite frankly, on the professional capabilities of the IDRC rather than the political. The respect that the IDRC professionals have gained has given them access to the sort of people in different parts of the developing world who will ensure that the projects benefit the large mass of people."

Reports: You were yourself on the Board of Governors of IDRC. When did you join the Board and what were your expectations of IDRC then?

Nettleford: "I was in it from the beginning—I'm a charter member and a founding member, and participated in helping to shape how the thing would develop and what our main concerns would be."

"My own interest is largely the full quest of maximizing the resources of the human being, our creative imagination, our creative intellect. I believe very strongly that, in the final analysis, it is the capacity of the human being to act, to think, to do, that will make anything work.

"What has happened, of course, is that I have learned a tremendous lot about the world, both the developed and the Third World. It has strengthened my own views of the world's inescapable interdependence, based on mutual respect and understanding by all people."

Reports: What were your expectations then when you sat on the IDRC Board?

Nettleford: "I expected it to do precisely what it did—develop an understanding of the capacity of the developing world to take decisions in their own interest and manifest it in practical programs; encourage that degree of self-confidence among peoples in the developing world, with no strings attached, and demonstrate to the world at large that those who enjoy a certain amount of wealth can relate to those who are poor on the basis of mutual respect."

Reports: How has IDRC evolved over the years?

Nettleford: "It has evolved as a highly powered professional body. It has gotten worldwide recognition and is, therefore, in many sorts of development assistance consortia.

"There are also new dimensions, For
IDRC has effectively challenged the old philosophy and pointed a way of how to help people help themselves

example, the North-South dialogue. It did give some money to the Brandt Commission and, although there were reservations on the Board, generally they felt that this was the thing to do. As it turned out, a report which is being hailed all over the western world has been produced. But the IDRC itself is not satisfied with that. It is very much concerned about how you implement some of those recommendations and is very much part and parcel of a kind of task force to look into this so that the report doesn’t become another classic in the literature of development rather than a basis for action.

"Also of late, Canadians, quite rightly, have been taking an interest in external affairs and how the Canadian dollar is spent. This, many of us who are non-Canadians on the Board appreciate, and have encouraged in the past because there needs to be a greater knowledge among Canadians of what is possible and what contribution they can make to developing a better and more equal world. The new IDRC president, Ivan Head, is, I think, ideally suited to spearhead this new phase of the development without abandoning the old commitments, while also encouraging a sense of interdependence based on mutual respect—not on anybody dominating anybody else, but, in fact, in a surge of sharing. The Canadian public can be drawn into this."

Reports: In the IDRC’s 10 years of existence, what would you say have been successes and milestones?

Nettleford: "In all fields there have been significant achievements. But more important, I think, it has effectively challenged the old philosophy, which was rooted in domination, in the patronizing of the South by the North, and it has pointed a way of how to help people help themselves—not in a kind of old-time aid society way, but in terms of getting projects off the ground. It has had multiplier effects on many of the development assistance agencies in the world."

Reports: Would you say that perhaps the work of IDRC has had some impact on the philosophy and concept of assistance?

Nettleford: "I know that has happened because Robert McNamara, World Bank president, in fact, was very much in contact with David Hopper (who is now a vice-president in the World Bank), and he was impressed with the orientation and the approach. None of these things are mutually exclusive. But we must be very careful that ‘aiding the poorest doesn’t become a fad because you then deprive the Third World of the necessary cadre of people to do the thinking, the continuing reflection, the evaluation. If you do, you will have the Third World remaining the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, while the developed world continues to be the brains for the rest of the world."

"This imbalance must go. We must all think, and we must all draw water. We need thinkers and doers in the Third World."

"There are several ways of doing this. This is where the collaboration with developed-world research institutions and with Canadian research institutions is important. This new dimension is very much coming to be part of our thinking at IDRC."

Reports: Has IDRC itself been imbalanced by putting too much emphasis on knowledge and research needs, rather than on meeting practical needs?

Nettleford: "No, because that has a kind of logical priority in terms of the needs of the Third World. They were never mutually exclusive, because the kind of projects we have been emphasizing are the ones that include intellectual and action content, the one drawing on the other. It’s theory out of action not the other way around. In fact, everything I am saying calls for a particular entrepreneurial skill, the skill of being able to identify the right kind of projects and being able to encourage Third World people in their own self-perception as to where they might go."

Reports: Looking in the future, Prof. Nettleford, do you think IDRC is suited to meet the challenges of the 80s? What changes do you think IDRC should undergo during this decade?

Nettleford: "Ask me what the problems of the 80s are. Those problems have not been solved. We need new thinking, and I think that the innovative urge that we had in 1970 continues to be of tremendous relevance."

"Yes, there has been a shift around—it has to do with energy now, it has to concern itself with alternative sources of energy. But the old commitment to build up capabilities for decision-taking and for discovering and storing appropriate knowledge which will lead to appropriate technology is something that will have to happen in the 80s."

"Maybe then one can say that the IDRC could pay more attention to delivery systems, to helping Third World countries use what has been discovered—the wheel, once invented, can be put to many uses."

"There are, of course, other things besides getting people to understand, to get at the storehouse of knowledge in science and technology and in human organization. The IDRC should help the Third World in building its own institutions and its own mechanisms, the frameworks within which it can actually take action."

"One last thing. In the whole question of the North-South dialogue, the New International Economic Order, I think IDRC has got to have a responsibility in helping the Third World marshal its own position. The Third World has a lot of energy for rhetoric, but it doesn’t have the expertise in bolstering effective advocacy. And I think that the New International Economic Order, in its effort to bring about the kind of world where there is some distributive justice and mutual respect between the different contributors to the world system, is something that IDRC could continue to make a greater contribution to and of which it could be more conscious."
