

Evaluating Excellence in International Development Research

Why does research excellence matter?

Since its inception in 1970, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has learned a great deal from its partners and grantees about how research can make a difference in solving complex development challenges. Research can strengthen public policy, technology development, and governance. How? By encouraging open inquiry and debate, empowering people with new knowledge, and enlarging the array of options and solutions available to policy and development challenges. But, research is less likely to make a positive difference if it is low quality. Indeed we would not want poor quality evidence influencing decisions that affect people's lives.

As development problems go unresolved, the appetite for more and different kinds of evidence grows. Sometimes what is needed is a quick study to map out economic or social policy options. Other times, it is years of field testing crop varieties to identify seeds that can feed the hungry and withstand climate change or drought. Along with the growing demand for evidence is an increasing demand for research funds. The Centre and the public want funding for research to go to organizations with the most promise to deliver excellent ideas, understandings, and solutions. But, what does excellence in international development research look like?

This is by no means an easy question to answer. Research capacity within and across countries varies. Some countries have had their research capacities and systems eroded by conflict or are perpetually weak due to persistent poverty. Many IDRC-supported efforts intend to build research capacity in

countries where research quality may be limited by infrastructure or the lack of trained researchers. In such contexts, striving for 'excellence' may be a continuous goal. In order to know if we are succeeding we need to understand where quality gaps are, and track efforts to close those gaps.

This raises another question: How can we know if the research we are supporting is excellent, and push ourselves and our grantees towards excellence?

The challenge of evaluating research excellence

One might imagine that tools are ready and available for evaluating research and research processes. And there are some. But most of these tools have been designed for evaluating academic research and tend to focus on evaluating research proposals, reports, or simple data, such as whether the research was published in a reputable academic journal or has been cited by other researchers in other journals. This approach is increasingly being criticized for being conservative, arbitrary, and political – and of stifling innovation and risk-taking in research. Even as universities wrestle with these measures of excellence, IDRC grantees and staff ask how these traditional measures can be useful in 'our' contexts.

To know if we are supporting excellence or moving towards it, we need to know what it is and how to measure it. IDRC currently defines excellence as "methodologically sound, evidence-based, and scientifically valid." However, the research the Centre supports focuses on development challenges on the ground. The users of that research may include policy makers, engineers, farmers, the courts, or the general public,

to name but a few. Excellence for these groups is likely to be research that grapples with questions they care about, is done with rigour and credibility, or has findings that can be used to make decisions. For this, existing frameworks are simply inadequate for assessing excellence.

The lack of clear definitions and suitable methods creates challenges. In the world of research, there can be incentives for demonstrating 'excellence' by supporting research that is likely to be published in academic journals. IDRC and its research grantees struggle with how to adequately demonstrate excellence, while resisting the temptation to support research because it is likely to be published, rather than research that is underexplored, ground breaking, or influential in other ways.

These challenges at IDRC speak to a broader gap within the international development research community, namely: the need for frameworks for analyzing research excellence that include the processes and outcomes of research, in different and changing contexts.

Responding to the Challenge

In response to this challenge, IDRC's Evaluation Unit is conducting a strategic evaluation that will explore and apply tools and approaches for evaluating research excellence. The aim of the evaluation is to identify ways of better evaluating and strengthening research excellence at IDRC, and in the broader research for development community.

This effort is being guided by the following four questions:

1. What does "research excellence" mean in international development research?
2. What approaches (frameworks, models) are suited for evaluating excellence in international development research?
3. How is IDRC performing in its goal of supporting research excellence?
4. What factors inhibit or enhance IDRC performance in supporting research excellence?

The evaluation is divided into two phases and is being supported by leading researchers from North America, South Asia, and Africa. The first phase, which began at the end of 2011, focuses on a review of existing definitions, approaches, measures, and experiences and will offer suggestions for frameworks that IDRC can use to evaluate research excellence. The second phase of the evaluation will apply these frameworks to IDRC-supported research.

For more information on the study please contact the co-leads of this study at IDRC: Katherine Hay (khay@idrc.org.in) or Colleen Duggan (cduggan@idrc.ca).