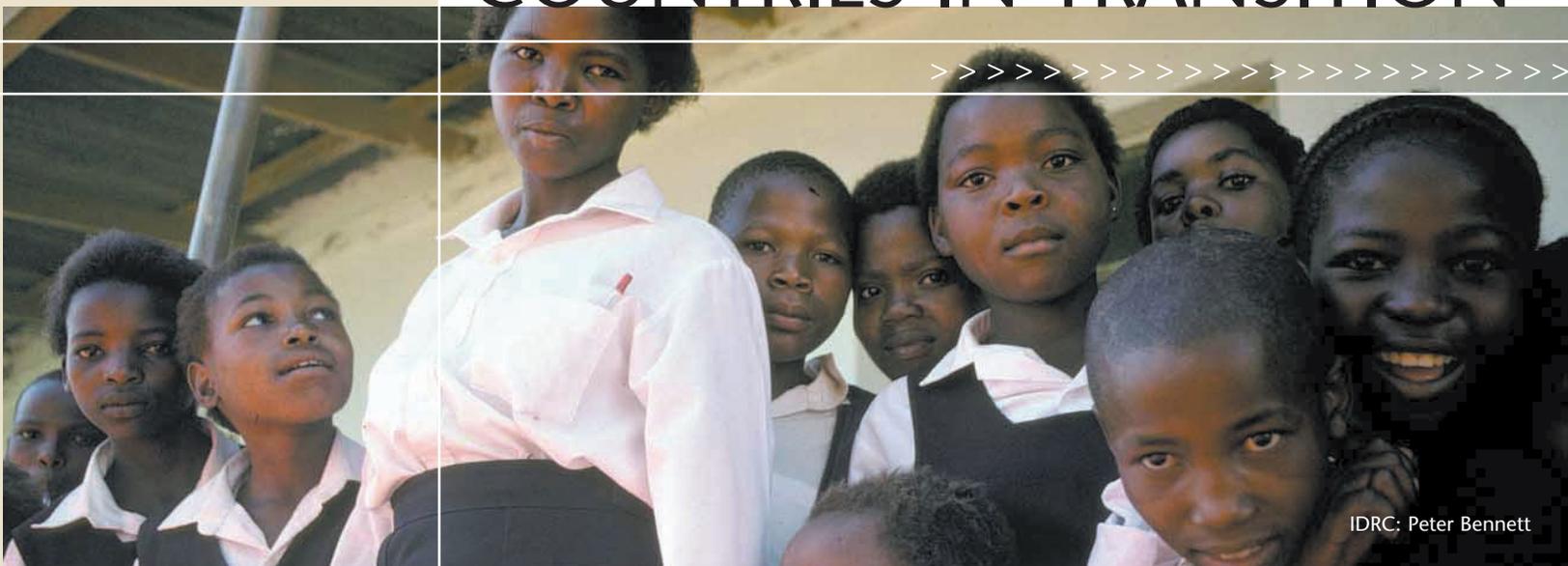


DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



IDRC: Peter Bennett

IDRC recently analyzed why and how it has worked in countries in transition during the past three decades — in transition from dictatorship to democratic rule, from communism to market economies, from war to peace. The goal was to better understand how IDRC gathers and shares pertinent information to inform programming and decision-making. How was the Centre alerted to impending transition? How did it investigate the situation? How did it respond?

Case studies were prepared on Algeria, Burma, Cambodia, Kenya, South Africa, the Southern Cone, Vietnam, and the West Bank and Gaza. Together, with an introductory brief, these eight cases show that IDRC has long been prepared to work in high-risk contexts before and in early transition periods, has played a distinct role in supporting research and policy-making for development, and has usually succeeded in adapting its programming to the fluid context.

SOUTH AFRICA

Ruled for decades by the systematic, violent injustice of apartheid, South Africa by the mid-1980s was subjected to international sanctions and near-universal condemnation. It was in this period — long before transition seemed likely — that IDRC opened its own new assessment of its approach to South Africa. An intensive, highly structured campaign of fact-finding and analysis, championed by IDRC executives and staff, was launched in late 1985. It would result, some three years later, in a program of development research support designed expressly to prepare South Africans for a non-racial democracy. The program certainly had influence: When the first freely elected majority government took office in 1994, more than half the members in the new South African cabinet had earlier participated in IDRC projects.

IDRC's searching review of its South Africa policy (a posture of complete avoidance) was prompted in part by the growth of the anti-apartheid movement. By 1985, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Mass Democratic Movement more generally were showing a new degree of organizational capacity and power in South Africa and among South African exiles. At the same time, some governments in Africa and abroad were starting to consider new options for coupling aid to the South African majority with existing sanctions against the minority regime. In this setting, the president of IDRC directed the Centre's reassessment — and advocated its progress throughout.

The review proved to be a many-sided and practically continuous process of information gathering, analysis, and deliberation. It included early and frequent contacts with ANC

leaders living in the frontline states; a stocktaking of evolving Canadian government policy toward South Africa; a survey of other donors' activities in South Africa; some discreet visits into South Africa by IDRC staffers; and consultations in Europe and the United States. Many of the findings pointed to IDRC engagement: ANC activists encouraged IDRC to support capacity building both in the exile community and inside South Africa; other donors, including a few governmental aid agencies, were already in South Africa; and Canadian government policy was largely positive — so long as engagement did not breach sanctions. Still, the issue remained controversial within IDRC. Some worried that any support for South Africans would jeopardize anti-apartheid solidarity internationally. Others cautioned against extending support that would inevitably amount to aid for political ends, as opposed to strictly development objectives (though some thought this posed a false distinction between “technical” and political processes).

By early 1988, however, the IDRC president was satisfied enough to present a policy proposal to IDRC's Board of Governors. And in the fall of 1988 the Board approved defining guidelines for a South Africa program. The Board agreed (in the record of their meeting) that the Centre “should support research projects and related activities that have the potential to inform the debate on the process of change and assist in the development of policies, strategies, and programs laying the ground for a future non-racial, democratic and unitary society which is consistent with IDRC's goals of sustainable growth, equity, and participation.”

It was a noteworthy undertaking, in more ways than one. First, it was an overtly political program meant to facilitate radical transformation in South Africa (even though transition itself had still not emerged as imminent). Second, this was much more about building policy-making capacity and confidence in the ANC, university faculties, and other oppositional civil society groups than about science and research: in the main, IDRC's South African partners were already educated and sophisticated scholar-researchers. Nevertheless, IDRC's selected course reflected the methodical and lengthy investigation and analysis that informed the decision. It also anticipated events: Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990; secret talks between the ANC and the South African government became public negotiations; and apartheid ended with the election of 1994. Transition was under way within two years of the IDRC policy change.

The earliest IDRC-supported research projects focused on health, urban issues, and economic and industrial policy. The annual program started small (CA\$10 620 in 1989) and grew to exceed CA\$1 million by 1991. In the first three years of programming, 8 of 11 projects involved partnerships with universities. And while projects closely followed conclusions reached in IDRC's assessment of South African needs, they also reflected IDRC's own experience and network of

competent partners. Early projects supported both process and substance — meetings of Mass Democratic Movement researchers and activists; university-based research on urban migration, local government, HIV/AIDS, and labour; and strengthening research in local health systems.

Embedded in the IDRC strategy were measures to mitigate risk. There was close monitoring, at every level of IDRC, to ensure adherence to guidelines. All projects required approval by either the president of IDRC or its Board. Work on each project was phased, so it could be assessed and modified early. Other donors, and Canadian universities experienced in South Africa and the region, were consulted often. And South African research partners were introduced to networks addressing the same problems or themes. To coordinate and reinforce transition programming, IDRC opened its own office in Johannesburg in 1992 (two years before apartheid's end); the office closed in 2001.

For all its recognized risks, moreover, the South Africa program enjoyed advantages of its own. Its research community was strong compared to that of many developing countries. And many South African researchers were extraordinarily well connected to the political struggle and to the post-apartheid policy community. The gap between research and policy — a common challenge elsewhere — was a smaller problem in South Africa (particularly when IDRC partners advanced to positions in government).

Nowhere was the link between research and policy plainer than in the realm of economic policy. An IDRC-supported meeting in 1989, in Switzerland, brought together (for the first time) exiled ANC economists, “progressive” economists based in South Africa, economists employed in the apartheid government, and private-sector economists — all to discuss future policy for South Africa. It was the first of several such assemblies that led to stronger capacity for economic policy analysis within South Africa itself. When Mandela, visiting Canada in 1990, formally asked the Canadian government to support further economic policy-making in South Africa, he credited IDRC's groundbreaking help. For its part, the Canadian government asked IDRC to carry out Mandela's request. Among IDRC endeavours: a multi-year program on governance, managed by IDRC and financed by CIDA, answering the need to prepare and strengthen the country's post-apartheid public administration.

The IDRC program in South Africa was never effortless. In 1990, in fact, the apartheid government declared IDRC unwelcome and denied it access to the country. That move made visits more difficult for a time, but not impossible. Impeded but never stopped, the program flourished — and has continued as South Africans pursue their own democratic development. Altogether, IDRC has supported more than 100 projects involving South Africa since 1989, representing allocations of more than CA\$53 million.

In sum, IDRC's experience in South Africa's transition displayed an interaction of strategic choices — long, wide-ranging and informed analysis; an exploitation of

network capacity nationally, regionally, and globally; energetic and consistent leadership by senior management; responsiveness to opportunity; flexibility; readiness to take measured risks for important results; and above all, patience. IDRC's South Africa program began before transition, as an explicit commitment to a new democracy. To some modest extent, the program helped to prepare the transition to that better future.

This case study is part of a longer report prepared by Nancy Smyth and Maggie Gorman, Policy and Planning Group, IDRC.

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