

## DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



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*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.*

## VIETNAM

VIETNAM HAS EMBARKED ON A FAR-REACHING TRANSITION of unusual character — an attempt to transform the country's economy, through market liberalization, without altering its centralized political structure. *Doi Moi*, (roughly, "reconstruction"), the term adopted in 1986, described a set of policies designed to foster a "market socialism" through large measures of free enterprise while preserving the political primacy and governing power of the Communist Party. At its inception it was a dramatic and outward-looking course change for Vietnam, and it led IDRC to explore the potential for supporting development research in the new policy environment. Careful fact-finding and consultations with Vietnamese researchers and government officials revealed undoubted challenges — and compelling opportunities. Early project initiatives, undertaken with the eager collaboration of Vietnam's government, have since matured into a continuing and productive research relationship.

IDRC's first, informal contacts with the Vietnam research community actually originated as early as 1983, when an IDRC officer was introduced to the Central Institute for Scientific and Technological Information (CISTI) in Hanoi; in 1988, a CISTI director was visiting IDRC in Ottawa. By then, IDRC staffers at all levels were focusing on possibilities for research partnerships, with vigorous encouragement from IDRC's president and from the Centre's regional director in Singapore. In early 1990, three members of IDRC's Information Sciences Division visited Vietnam for meetings with development and research institutions, local decision-makers, and policy planners. Their objectives: to observe the state of research in Vietnam, to judge the country's needs, and to

understand the Vietnamese government's own development priorities in the midst of *Doi Moi* transition.

More visits followed. IDRC specialists in agriculture and food sciences, and in social sciences, traveled to Vietnam later in 1990; a Vietnamese delegation flew to Canada that same year; and in November 1990, IDRC's president went to Vietnam at the invitation of the chairman of Vietnam's State Committee for Science and Technology. Meanwhile, IDRC was gathering advice and insights from other donors (including United Nations agencies) already active in Vietnam.

The information gathering yielded evidence both of promise and of challenges. There were significant obstacles to fruitful research, chief among them Vietnam's opaque and secretive procedures of governance and decision. There were also (at least to outsiders) persisting ambiguities in the mandates and relationships of the country's research institutions. And while Vietnam displayed considerable capacity in the hard sciences, there appeared to be a near absence of capacity for social science research.

Even so, Vietnam's assets represented real opportunity. The country had world-class scientists in some disciplines. It had a strong educational base for the preparation of young scholars and researchers. It was cooperating with other donors — many of them network partners with IDRC in other countries. Its government was explicitly and convincingly committed to economic transition. And members of the government, including ministers, were enthusiastically inviting IDRC's engagement in Vietnam's development. On balance, Vietnam's needs and its readiness for research support appeared to justify a commitment of IDRC programming.

Three elements of IDRC's strategy in Vietnam served to mitigate risks. First, funding from several IDRC divisions (mainly agriculture; information sciences; social sciences; and environment and natural resource management) was pooled in what amounted to a "Vietnam fund." This allowed flexibility while Vietnam's needs and capacities were identified more fully. A second measure of risk mitigation was provided by the involvement of known partners — including governmental aid agencies and UN organizations. The third element of risk mitigation was the small size of the early projects: in the first year, 1991, five projects were started with IDRC funding of CA\$672 580. (Four of these related to agriculture and food; the fifth was a project in information management.)

Importantly, the object in Vietnam was not to apply ready-made foreign approaches to *Doi Moi*. Instead, IDRC programming (and Vietnamese government policy) aimed at developing the country's indigenous capacity for policy-relevant research — and for research-based policy-making. This required longer time frames, and stronger commitments. It also meant experimentation at first, with intensive mentoring and training, to foster a new generation of skilled

researchers and policy analysts. Progress was facilitated, of course, by Vietnam's own deliberate and increasing openness to the world of trade, investment, and knowledge.

Despite its cautious start, IDRC's programming in Vietnam accelerated quickly with experience. In 1994, annual IDRC spending for Vietnam surpassed CA\$2 million, in 15 projects that year. The program in later years advanced from experimentation to more mainstream development research themes. Recent projects have helped Vietnam design trade liberalization and competition policies (in part as preparation for admission to the World Trade Organization). They have supported community-based management of forests and coastal ecosystems. They have addressed the persistent and particular burdens of poverty on women in a period of strong economic growth. And they have helped Vietnam's researchers become full participants in international research networks.

As Vietnam's transition continues to evolve, IDRC's overall objective has stayed constant: to strengthen the country's capacity to design and execute policies for sound, equitable, and environmentally sustainable development. The approach has benefited from program flexibility and systematic networking with Vietnamese, Southeast Asian, and global partners. But it has relied always on two invaluable assets: highly motivated, educated, and talented Vietnamese researchers, and the willing collaboration of a government committed to transition.

*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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