



IDRC: Neill McKee

## Roads to Knowledge

Governments seeking effective policies to support their development efforts often need to consult independent experts. The stories of three IDRC-funded research consortia that operate in varied environments demonstrate the range of fruitful approaches available for harnessing outside expertise.

"He who would do great things should not attempt them all alone."  
Seneca the Younger

# RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

## The Development Challenge: Finding the right advice

Modern economies are complex engines, which makes modern statecraft a daunting enterprise. Once upon a time, politicians, backed perhaps by a few astute mandarins, could steer government purely on the basis of personal principle, ideological tilt, and the occasional nod toward private interests. Today, however, running a large economy without the continuing help of expert technical advice is unimaginable.

Most governments rely to some extent on well-educated outsiders to supply the independent and credible scientific knowledge needed to

underpin economic policy-making. As one might expect, poor countries frequently lack an indigenous reservoir of such technocratic support. But even the state bureaucracies of developed countries find it impossible to build

in-house all the capability that they need, and so must turn to experts based outside government.

Development agencies often provide resources for expatriate consultants, but a continuing reliance on external experts may inhibit the building of local capacity for those tasks. Furthermore, consultants often bear a tool box of tried-and-true methods and assumptions that may sidetrack the effort to understand the client's particular problems. Every country has its unique concerns, and one-size-fits-all solutions are at greater risk of failure.

## The Idea: Local knowledge networks

Over the years, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has fostered hundreds of knowledge networks to promote applied research in developing countries. Initially these alliances were an almost incidental by-product of IDRC's activities, but now the Centre intentionally cultivates them as engines of learning.

The core business of these groups — which go by varied labels like “consortium,” “association,” “partnership,” and so on — is research for development. They advance the cross-fertilization of ideas, publicize findings, influence government policy, and broaden the

capacity for doing research. The diversity of the organizations and individuals that constitute these forums makes them remarkably flexible collaborations. They are well equipped to tackle a range of economic problems.

It has made good sense, therefore, for IDRC to apply the networks model to challenging the shortage of indigenous economic policy expertise in the developing world. In the case of three high-level initiatives — in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa — IDRC has provided patient and enduring support to path-breaking institutions. Each has responded by cultivating local research capacity in a way that addresses local needs.

## The Impact: Foundation building in Vietnam

The Vietnam Economic Research Network (VERN) may be unusual among knowledge-building institutions in that it operates in an environment where arms-length analysis is a novelty. Not many years ago, all of Vietnam's public policy emerged from the country's one-party command structure, and the very notion of an independent consultancy was unimaginable. Compared with similar organizations in other developing countries, VERN and its predecessors started with a blank slate.

Thus, while it carries out the same kind of practical research and capacity-building functions as do similar consortia elsewhere, VERN's special role has been to provide direct advice to government decision-makers. This high-level input hastens the creation of the basic institutions of a modern industrialized society and at the same time builds local expertise to keep the economy growing.

It began in 1991, when Vietnam embarked upon a root-and-branch transformation, converting its economy from a centrally planned to a market-based system. This reform policy was called *Doi moi* (reconstruction). The ideological push for collectivization was abandoned and private enterprise encouraged, and the country began to look outward toward integration with regional and global economic institutions. As a result, during the past two decades Vietnam achieved rapid and broad-based growth and has significantly reduced poverty.

“VERN's important contribution is to launch a culture of reference and interaction back and forth between research and policy. VERN has kicked-started this process and is helping to sustain it.”

— Dang Nhu Van (Cam Ly), researcher and former Deputy Director, VERN



IDRC: Ramona Ramlochand

This radical transition was complicated, however, by the scarcity of personnel qualified to carry out evidence-based policy analysis. From the start, IDRC stepped in with support for a series of research networks designed to boost Vietnam's capabilities in this area. VERN is the most recent of these consortia. Launched in 2002, and funded by IDRC at least until 2009, VERN mobilizes a small number of research teams comprising leading Vietnamese scholars, including many younger academics and women.

VERN offers guidance and training in methodologies with the aim of creating a Vietnamese "community of researchers." In its applied studies, meanwhile, VERN assists the emergence of national institutions and governance structures which — while customary in other societies — are new to Vietnam. Its policy papers, provided upon government request, have helped the country complete key changes such as trade liberalization and banking reforms, integrate into the global economy, and establish a modern market and investment system. In the run-up to Vietnam's 2006 accession to membership in the World Trade Organization, for example, VERN addressed the policy tension between ensuring competitiveness while raising employment and reducing poverty.

Encouraged by its success, Vietnam aims to graduate from a low-income to a middle-income country by 2010. IDRC, meanwhile, hopes to extend the VERN concept to the subregional level, embracing Laos and Cambodia.

### **On the Ground: Enriching the debate in Peru**

In Peru, the Economic and Social Research Consortium (Consortio de Investigación Económica y Social — CIES) emerged during the instability suffered by that country during the final decades of the 20th century.

Created in 1989 with support from IDRC and from the Canadian International Development Agency, it focused initially on economic questions and on sustaining research capacity in the face of the widespread exodus of professionals and academics. In 1999 its mandate was expanded to include social issues, and CIES began to devote increased attention to mobilizing research capacity in order to promote

public debate. Today the private umbrella group comprises over 30 Peruvian academic, research, and government institutions, and non-governmental organizations.

CIES and VERN have differences and similarities. CIES is much larger, and it brings together institutional rather than individual members. But both consortia are national in scope, both seek to carry out high quality, policy-relevant research, and both support the training and capacity building of researchers. The key similarity is that, like VERN, CIES has adapted its strategy to its context.

CIES operates in a pluralistic political culture and consequently it seeks to engage with both policy-makers and civil society generally. It takes the initiative in supporting research by its members, in disseminating results, and in launching public debate on topical issues.

CIES is large and broad-based enough to deflect any accusation of ideological bias: it embraces a wide swath of opinion from right to left. Its credibility allowed the organization to play an important non-partisan role in Peru's 2006 general elections. The Consortium commissioned think pieces on 10 crucial themes in public policy, including health, education, employment, competitiveness, social programs, and so on, and published these papers as a framework for electoral debate. In addition, the Consortium convened and widely publicized debates among the candidates.

From 1999 to 2005, CIES supported more than 300 research projects carried out by its members. Because of its efforts, CIES has dramatically raised public expectations in Peru about the level of future debate on economic policy issues.

### **Capacity Building: Supporting African voices**

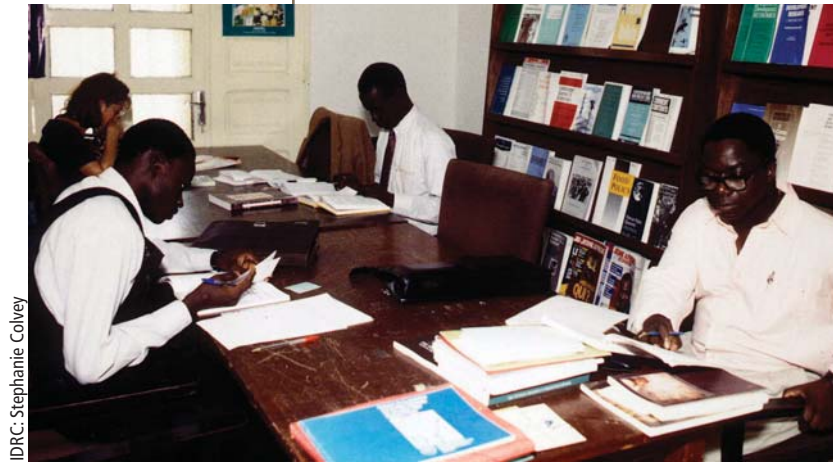
With help from IDRC and other donors, the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) was launched in the 1980s to provide an African response to the onerous structural adjustment policies imposed by international financial institutions. Today, the non-profit Nairobi-based organization has become the premier African research body in the field of economics. It enjoys solid credibility and the ability to convene scholars and officials at high levels. And it confronts topical issues: within its general focus on poverty reduction and



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"When you have a country with a weak democracy, every debate becomes very partisan. CIES is trying to provide information that would allow policy-makers and public opinion makers to look at things in a more impartial way." Carlos Eduardo Aramburú, former Executive Director, CIES

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IDRC: Stephanie Colvey

economic growth, AERC has recently been investigating the increasing role of the “Asian drivers” — China and India — in the economy of sub-Saharan Africa.

Like the other two consortia, AERC supports a program of policy-oriented research activities, dissemination of findings, and networking. AERC differs from the others, however, in significant ways. It is continental rather than national in scope. It enjoys a broad base of financial support, with contributions from 12 international donor agencies, including IDRC. And to a greater degree than the other organizations, it concentrates on building individual capacities.

AERC’s support for graduate studies in economics aims to nurture the next generation of African academics and policy advisors. The organization runs collaborative M.A. and Ph.D. programs, drawing networks of students and universities from across the continent to share instructors, curricula, and resources. Thanks to these courses, African students no longer need to travel abroad to complete their degrees, and Africa’s brain drain is stemmed because the professional opportunities for teaching staff have been widened. The hundreds of alumni of these programs now form a cadre of influential economists in policy-making institutions, the private sector, and academia. Among prominent AERC graduates, for instance, are Charles Soludo, Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, and Njuguna S. Ndung’u, Governor of the Central Bank of Kenya (who was also a program officer in IDRC’s Nairobi office).

At a time when some have been questioning the value of providing foreign aid to Africa, AERC stands as a remarkable success story. The consortium continues to grow while sustaining a high level of local involvement. Its publications, workshops, seminars, and conferences form the cutting edge of policy-formation in Africa. And its success is reflected in AERC’s use as a model for the establishment of similar research networks in other world regions.

### **Future Challenges: Adapt and persevere**

Although these are just three of many knowledge networks that IDRC has funded, their experiences yield valuable lessons.

First, there is no single way of supporting policy-relevant research that works in all circumstances. In each of these cases, the institution adapted its structure and approach to the problems unique to its context, and in every instance the results have been positive.

Second, it pays to be patient. Each of these initiatives has been supported by IDRC and others for many years, and in the end the investment has been rewarded. Each project has prospered and provided substantial benefits to its home economy.

Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is one of the world’s leading institutions in the generation and application of new knowledge to meet the challenges of international development. For more than 35 years, IDRC has worked in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

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