

### 3. Guiding Principles of IDRC's Evaluation Unit

Evaluation is both science and art. The art of identifying critical issues to be evaluated, organizing them conceptually, and bringing the appropriate people to participate in the collection, interpretation, and utilization of the evaluation findings is as important as the systematic collection and analysis of reliable data.

The guiding principles articulated below are consistent with the principles outlined in our previous Evaluation Unit Strategy, 2000-2005. The key evolution reflects the importance the Centre attaches to broader processes of evaluative thinking, not only the value in formal evaluation processes and documents.

Overall, the Centre's evaluation efforts should balance learning with accountability. In practice, accountability tends to look for and report on results and the resources consumed to achieve those, while learning tends to look more closely at the "why" and "how" of success and failure. The purpose of an evaluation should be clear and the process transparent.

In light of this, the Evaluation Unit follows a Utilization-Focused Evaluation (U-FE) approach to its work. This approach does not advocate any particular evaluation content, model, method, theory, or even use. Rather, it helps primary intended users select the most appropriate content, model, methods, theory, and uses for their particular situation. As no evaluation can be value-free, utilization-focused evaluation answers the question of whose values will frame the evaluation by working with clearly identified primary intended users who have responsibility to apply evaluation findings and implement recommendations. Evaluations, therefore, provide opportunities for project or program stakeholders to reconcile their various perspectives and/or visions of reality.<sup>5</sup>

The following principles guide the work of the Evaluation Unit:

- **Evaluations should enlist the participation of relevant users.** To be useful, evaluations need to produce relevant, action-oriented findings and this is fostered by sustained involvement and ownership by the client and users throughout the process.
- **Evaluation processes should develop capacity in evaluative thinking and evaluation use.** Be it IDRC managers, program staff, or project partners, evaluation should increase participants' capacities and comfort with evaluation. Exclusive reliance on external expertise can limit an organization's ability to be clear and specific about its goals and to learn and apply lessons. Specific strategies can be built into evaluations that are explicitly aimed at fostering these organizational characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Quinn Patton. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation : The New Century Text*, London: Sage, 1997.

- **Evaluative thinking adds value from the outset of a project or program.** Evaluative thinking can make a project or program more effective by helping clarify the results to be achieved, the strategies that will contribute to their achievement, and the milestones that will demonstrate progress. This is true from design through implementation.
- **Evaluation should meet standards for ethical research and evaluation quality.** In order to ensure the validity of the evaluation findings, accepted social science research methods and procedures should be followed. The quality of evaluations are assessed against four internationally accepted standards: utility, feasibility, accuracy, and propriety.
- **The decision to evaluate should be strategic not routine.** Evaluation is designed to lead to action and can contribute to decision-making and strategy formulation at all levels. To aim evaluations at providing useful findings, the Centre is selective in determining what issues, projects and programs are to be assessed at what time.
- **Evaluation should be an asset for those being evaluated.** Evaluation can impose a considerable time and resource burden on partner organizations and their participation should not be taken for granted. They should benefit from the process and should have control over the evaluation agenda when they are the intended users.