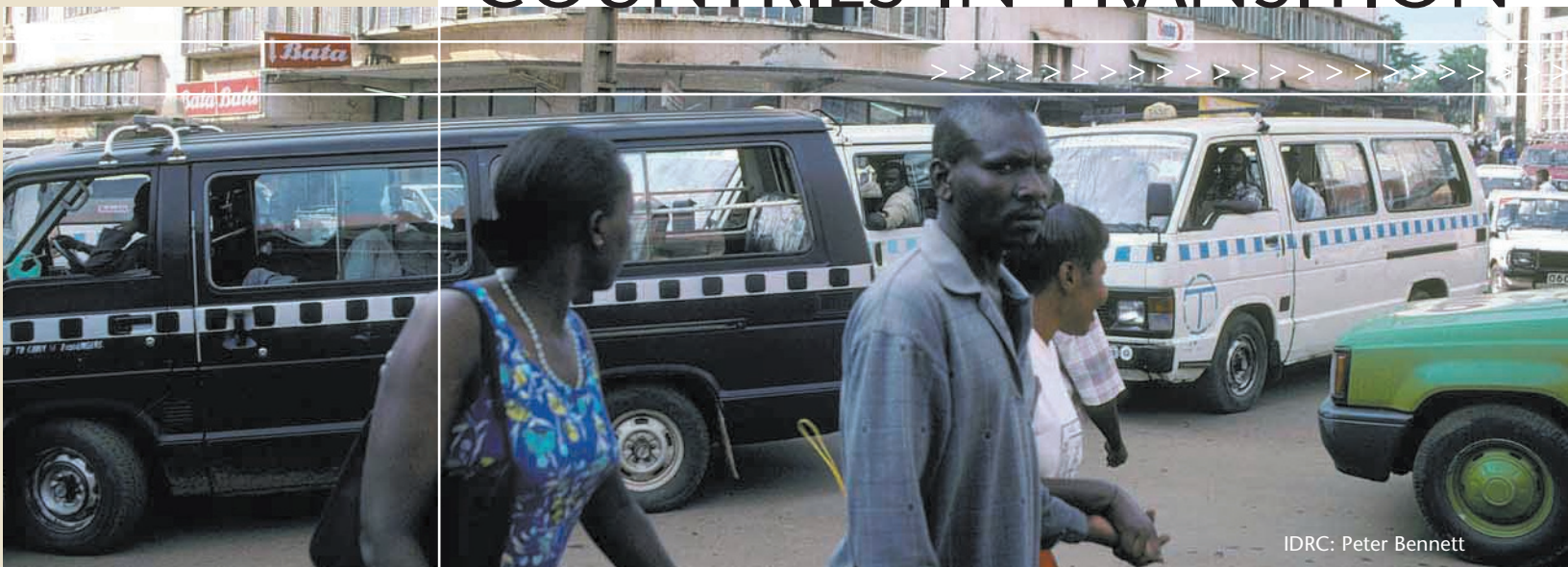


DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



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.

INTRODUCTION

ISSUES AND LESSONS

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IS RISKY WORK — and never riskier than in conditions of political, economic, and social transition. But transitions in developing countries can open radically new opportunities for research that informs political change and relieves poverty, while advancing development that is both equitable and sustainable. In fact, development itself is commonly defined by these dangerous, promising transitions from dictatorships toward democracy, from failing economies to well-governed markets, from war to peace. For all their risks and sudden reversals, transitions can generate real possibilities for productive development research.

The opportunities often presented in transitions therefore raise pressing questions for researchers — and for policymakers. How can research be designed and conducted to mitigate risks? How can research findings inform better policy quickly and effectively, and strengthen democratic practice, in the midst of transitions? In short, how can development research exploit the opportunities of transitions for maximum lasting benefit?

The discussion here reports on instructive answers that have emerged from a systematic examination of research fostered by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Since its creation in 1970, IDRC has pursued a simply stated objective: to support technical and social innovation that helps improve the lives and futures of poor and otherwise marginalized people in developing countries. This is research carried out

in developing countries, by the people of those countries. Some of the most striking research has been conducted in the confusion and struggles of political, economic, and social transition.

This exercise started with a survey by IDRC analysts of some 25 countries where IDRC has supported research in the course of transitions. From that list, eight cases were chosen for a closer look — Algeria; Burma; Cambodia; Kenya; South Africa; the Southern Cone of South America; Vietnam; and the West Bank and Gaza. The cases represent diverse experience and regional balance. More than that, they illuminate the critical issue: How can development research seize the opportunities, and manage the risks, that come in transitions?

The evidence leads to three over-arching observations.

First, it is best to be clear what “transition” means in the context of developing countries. It almost never means an orderly or seamless improvement in a country’s state of affairs — from dictatorship to democracy, for instance. Transitions are generally disorderly and unpredictable, often surprising, and subject to setbacks. They can take months, or decades, to reach some roughly stable equilibrium. For present purposes, “transition” is a short-hand term describing major political, economic, or social change in a country. This definition includes the familiar transformations of recent years — from communist to market economies, from military to civilian rule, from warfare to some measurable degree of political peace. But transitions can also include major changes in the quality of governance — for example, from corrupt autocracy to participatory and accountable democracy. Change is not always for the better. But transforming governance typically requires thorough change. And transitions toward democracy can prove especially turbulent.

The second observation drawn from the evidence is that transitions impose special demands on the design and conduct of development research. Political turmoil and governmental repression before and during a transition can place researchers in physical danger; scholars in the social sciences are frequently targets of specific governmental disapproval. Travel bans and restrictions are common, and access to official information and facilities is often prohibited. Academic freedom can suffocate in these circumstances, and impediments to policy-relevant research may look intimidating.

For all these reasons, supporting development research in transitions calls for patience, tenacity, and agile opportunism. It calls for flexibility — especially in the early stages, capacity building might necessarily precede actual research. Above all, the particular features of any real or impending transition place a high value on strategic intelligence about local conditions. That means knowing the country, its politics, and its potential research partners even before research starts.

Managing the many difficulties of doing research in transitions also places demands on the research-supporting organization itself. Information is a scarce resource in these situations. It should be shared widely, up and down and across the organization. Spirited leadership is often decisive in achieving project success — leadership at every level, from headquarters to the field. A precarious research enterprise can be saved by a well-connected champion. Research managers will sometimes face the hard choice between seizing the moment and waiting to gather the strategic information that is always desirable — and not always available. Such decisions will be improved by an organizational mix of experience, ingenuity, and quick reflexes.

The third observation from the case evidence is that ***there is a telling distinction between research in transitions and research on transitions***. In Vietnam, IDRC-supported research has concentrated overall on issues in transition — in agriculture, for example. In the South African case, research was directed explicitly at preparing for change — research on transition, and indeed for transition.

Frequently, local politics are more hospitable to research in transition; improving health care or irrigation can be less contentious than openly addressing failures of governance. Even so, research that is apparently apolitical can help shape a transition as it unfolds. It can create capacity for independent research and policy advocacy. What's more, research that deeply engages community participation can equip people with the information and confidence to decide their futures — and hold their governments accountable. Research should also respond to transitions as they advance; IDRC's engagement in the West Bank and Gaza began mainly in agriculture and health, but eventually took on the questions of peace and governance central to transition itself. In the end — especially if transition goes well — research in and on a transition together makes for more sustainable, equitable, and democratic development.

TAKING ACTION: 10 APPROACHES TO GOOD PRACTICE

Development research is inherently risky. Where research and policy capacities are weak and economies are under stress, outcomes are always uncertain. These qualities are characteristic of developing countries. And they are especially evident in the disruptions of transitions. Yet these are the conditions in which relevant research can pay high rewards — accelerating progress for better governance, poverty reduction, and fairly shared economic growth.

Successful development research in transitions depends on managing the inevitable risks, and avoiding the worst of the dangers. Naturally, each case will present its own challenges and opportunities. But experience shows that some specific practices generally improve the chances for happy outcomes. They are suggested here not as hard-and-fast rules, but as considerations for effective action — 10 approaches to good practice.

1. Be alert to a sudden or subtle opportunity to introduce development research into a transition's earliest stages. Then **seize the chance** when it appears. Even in pre-transitional conditions — while apartheid still ruled in South Africa, for example — openings can emerge at least for experimental collaboration that might later flourish as transitions evolve. Quick responses can be rewarded. In Kenya, timely reaction facilitated a transition's early progress in governance reform. In most cases, detecting opportunity and devising a prompt response will require staff competence in the country or region — and will probably benefit from the energies of a staff champion, someone enthusiastic and knowledgeable enough to propel decision and action.

2. Be patient. Transitions are vulnerable to stalls and diversions. But developing capacity for indigenous research — investing in education, institution-building, and personal relationships — can pay off years later. The wait is often worthwhile. Early IDRC experience with South Africans in exile, and with South Americans resisting dictatorships, led to long and productive partnerships and programming. These kinds of capacity building can yield surprising and powerful results — not least when former research partners go on to assume high office in democratic governments. Indeed, valuable research in transitions often begins with talent spotting.

Sometimes, as in the West Bank and Gaza, earning a reputation for determined patience will itself forge a trust and affinity strong enough to survive setback and hardship. Even amid violence and social upheaval, it can be possible to find and develop sustained research relationships with serious, able, independent program partners.

3. Gather strategic intelligence even before transitions emerge, and **get connected.** A strong understanding of the potential for research programming starts with a good and up-to-date knowledge of a country's political, economic, and social dynamics and its cultural setting. Effective intelligence gathering does not mean slavishly completing *pro forma* country profiles: risk assessments should take different shapes in different contexts. But intelligence collection does mean striving to understand a country and its people, with an eye for emerging opportunities to attempt research in, or on, the earliest phases of a transition. Sometimes, as in IDRC's lengthy assessment of research potential in Burma, strategic intelligence leads to a conclusion that transition is unlikely. (On the other hand, early-stage transitions are sometimes only apparent in hindsight. Experienced judgment, and well-trained intuition, can help distinguish false starts from the real thing.)

"Being there" is often helpful, but it is not always essential. Being in the region can suffice; IDRC's well-connected regional officer in Southeast Asia proved invaluable for assessing and launching programs even in countries (such as Cambodia) where IDRC had little or no prior presence on the ground. "Being

there” is just one way of getting connected — knowing who’s who in local research and policy communities, and building local networks of current and potential partners.

4. Share knowledge throughout the research-supporting organization, at all levels and across functional and regional divides. The logic of information sharing is obvious in principle, but not always respected in practice. Circulating information freely through an organization elicits more diverse advice, and informs better decisions. It allows for quick and efficient deployment of the right people with the right experience. It establishes a valuable documentary record, to support and speed later decisions in changed circumstances. Such a record can teach an institution the lessons of its own experience — and feed the sort of evaluation that can dramatically improve organizational performance over time.

Finally, sharing knowledge can ensure that an institution’s reputation will travel well — and endure. A research-supporting organization can reassure prospective partners, and encourage new beginnings, when it brings to the relationship a well-founded reputation for successes in other places. But programming managers have to know about those experiences in order to use the asset that reputation represents.

5. Triangulate. To maximize probabilities for effective project or program design and implementation demands the engagement of three critical points of organizational decision and action: the manager in the field, the manager in charge of the program at headquarters, and the chief executive of the organization. In IDRC’s experience, difficult programs proved most robust when they were discussed and supported at least by a regional director, a program director at headquarters, and IDRC’s president. Not only does triangulation invoke information sharing and promote informed deliberation, it also encourages lasting organizational support for a project through adversity. High-level triangulation draws on the best wisdom in an institution and imparts leadership, particularly where conditions are trying or uncertain.

6. Work with other donors. Cooperation with like-minded foundations, governmental and intergovernmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and others can help secure the benefits of shared knowledge and joint effort. A necessary part of preparatory strategic intelligence will be an understanding of what other research-supporting donors are doing — and what they have avoided. From Algeria to South Africa to South America’s Southern Cone, IDRC has consulted both active and non-active donors to great advantage. In some cases, IDRC has joined proven partnerships; in other cases IDRC has pioneered and led collaborations into new research ventures. But note: genuinely productive partnerships demand financial commitment. True cooperation is never simply a vehicle for research on the cheap; rather, it is a strategy for pooling effort for better outcomes.

7. Engage the foreign policy community, and where possible put the assets of diplomacy at the service of research objectives. There has been a constructive tension between IDRC’s lively independence as a Crown corporation created by the

Canadian Parliament and its operation as a taxpayer-supported instrument of Canadian public policy. In truth, IDRC has often exercised its independence in the ways that it has collaborated with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency. This experience shows that development research support can depart from government aid and foreign policy, or precede it, or advance it, with reciprocal benefits to research and policy.

In Vietnam, for example, IDRC's early activity helped inform subsequent Canadian government engagement in the country. In the West Bank and Gaza, IDRC enjoyed an advantage over diplomacy in that it could work in a territory and society that did not constitute a state. Ordinarily, IDRC staffers and Canadian diplomats have consulted each other in pursuit of different but aligned objectives. Government-to-government relationships can open doors for research and policy influence, whereas research can test the nature of a transition and establish a presence before diplomacy arrives. Research programming and diplomacy both benefit when a complementarity is found between the two endeavours.

8. Innovate, in program design and funding arrangements. Transitions generally surprise and confound. They defy bureaucratic templates and defeat normal procedures. They reward experimenting and agility, and favour invention. Fostering research in transitions therefore calls for calculated risk-taking: searching out potential research partners in unlikely places; venturing investments in unproven institutions; freeing funds at short notice; and reacting quickly to new hazards or opportunities. In the South African case, IDRC's early contributions were not strictly for research; first contacts were directed more to building policy capacity among very able members of the African National Congress (sometimes, just by supporting their attendance at regional conferences) to prepare for the inception of majority government. Flexibility is a virtue.

9. Exploit your own organizational strengths. Supporting sustainable research involves a continual matching of identified needs in a developing country with the organizational expertise of the supporting institution. Opportunism and improvisation work best when they are rooted in proven staff competencies, existing networks, and management connections in the global donor community. Reconciling recipient needs and donor capabilities becomes particularly important in transitions, where new conditions can suddenly challenge institutional competencies in unexpected ways. IDRC's own competencies have evolved over more than 35 years — but IDRC has consistently striven for strategic focus reflecting its evolving strengths. Capacity in social and economic policy research, for example, has been deployed in transitional settings as different as Kenya, the Southern Cone, and Vietnam, and West Bank and Gaza. Expertise in farming, environmental policy, and natural resource management

has been applied from Cambodia to Algeria. Efficient research-supporting organizations know their limits and play to their own comparative advantage — achieving economies of skill for best effect.

10. Find and occupy the convergence zone between research objectivity and policy relevance. Development research is explicitly purpose-driven — it is intended to discover and apply knowledge to reduce poverty and advance sustainable, equitable development. It is research for policy and action, especially in transitions. That's relevance. But strong research also compels a good measure of independence — with space and freedom enough, and professional discipline, to pursue new questions to new answers, despite governmental indifference or even hostility to the research enterprise. That's objectivity.

Research that counts will contribute to transitions that are effective, durable, and just. This kind of research occurs in the interaction between tough-minded objectivity and timely participation in the politics of policy and change.

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

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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