

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



Photo: Patrick Gruban

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.

ALGERIA

TRANSITIONS SELDOM INTRODUCE THEMSELVES UNAMBIGUOUSLY. More often the early signs are detected as much by experienced intuition as by any systematic change of circumstances. The objective, for timely interventions of development research, is to catch the moment, apply the best possible analysis of needs and capabilities, and then to offer helpful and effective support. When Algeria showed the first, ambiguous signs of transition, IDRC was ready to test the potential for productive research — and discovered some institutional complications of its own.

IDRC had been present in Algeria in earlier decades — supporting small, episodic programming from the 1970s through the 1990s, mostly in agriculture, natural resource management, and information sciences. But even these modest projects were abandoned by the late 1990s as conditions of political violence and repression rendered development research impossible. The security of IDRC staff and Algerian partners became intolerably compromised in Algeria's civil conflict, while limits on free expression and other civil and legal rights curtailed the conduct of useful research.

By 2002, a measure of social peace had been re-established — albeit unstable and frequently marred by violence. Early progress toward democratic governance was apparent, not least in a succession of elections. Economic reforms were proceeding. At IDRC, after an eight-year absence from Algeria, IDRC senior management sensed it was time to make a fresh assessment of prospects for resuming support for research in the country.

That review began with a preliminary exploration in three parts: background discussions with knowledgeable officials in the Canadian foreign policy and aid communities; a commissioned survey of the Algerian research and policy landscapes by an Algerian scholar (who had worked with IDRC in the 1980s); and an examination of existing donor activity in Algeria. This was, by the standards of most transition cases, an extensive exercise in strategic analysis. It was facilitated by some long-standing connections IDRC had earlier formed in Algeria. And it was encouraged from the start by the Canadian ambassador in Algiers, and by a positive alignment with Canadian foreign policy: the Canadian government had already taken initiatives to re-open an engagement with Algeria after the worst years of the 1990s.

Results of the IDRC review were promising enough to justify a major mission to Algeria in September 2002 by a number of Centre staff, including a vice-president. The visitors called on six ministries, offices of the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, and a variety of Algerian non-governmental organizations; these included research institutes, human rights advocates, and the Algerian bar association. The aim throughout was to gauge whether and how IDRC could usefully resume programming in Algeria, in fields such as water conservation, information sciences, economic policy, human rights, and democracy building.

Again, the findings encouraged next steps and focused attention on three prospective research areas: water (especially demand management); peace and reconciliation (in which IDRC had supported research in other transition contexts); and information and communication technologies (ICTs). The next steps included a more methodical identification of prospective research partners among Algerians, and a canvass of IDRC's own program managers for the project ideas and design necessary for any new involvement in Algeria.

A further trip to Algeria, in June 2003, reinforced the belief of IDRC management in their chosen areas of focus. More to the point, it confirmed key facts about Algerian research capacity. The Algerian research community was populated by highly trained, open-minded, sophisticated specialists in several fields, but they were tightly confined by the conventions of their own disciplines. IDRC, by contrast, has vigorously pursued multidisciplinary research enterprises — framing new questions, devising new methods, and achieving new solutions by combining knowledge and skills across the old interdisciplinary boundaries. IDRC's growing investment in ecohealth, which integrates environmental issues into innovative health policies and practices, is an example of this approach.

In any event, it eventually became evident that IDRC's own institutional reorganization of research themes and operations (part of the Centre's regular five-year program review) was impeding progress on a new program in Algeria. More than once, IDRC program managers had to revise their earlier proposals

to willing Algerian partners because IDRC's own approaches were changing in all its developing-country programs. Again as an example: Problems of water use and management were shifting in IDRC approaches from questions of land and water, or resource management, to ecohealth issues linking water quality and conservation to human health and community well-being. Reshaping the research question, in this and other areas, required time-consuming reconsideration by Algerians eager to get started on projects.

There were other obstacles as well. Normal personnel changes at IDRC delayed some decisions and project work — notwithstanding continuing interest from senior IDRC staff. In some cases (maybe because of these difficulties), project officers did not consistently adopt proposals from Algeria as their top priorities.

Nevertheless, these impediments were overcome in due course and important research began. A crucial workshop in March 2005 reinforced the capacity of Algerian researchers for multidisciplinary and participatory research methods — breaking down the conventional divisions, and engaging communities directly in research to improve their futures. At the same time, IDRC was identifying Algerian organizations ready to engage fully in new projects. And at IDRC headquarters, newly appointed managers adopted the Algerian program with zeal and purpose.

By 2006, some half-dozen IDRC-supported projects (amounting to about CA\$1.2 million) were active in Algeria. They included follow-up progress in multidisciplinary and participatory approaches in ecohealth and resource management; capacity building for Algerian institutions to find and mobilize donor financing for research; an assessment of existing and potential telecentres, where communities have low-cost access to the Internet; and participation in a study (based at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies) on the development of political parties in six Arab countries, Algeria among them.

In time, IDRC and Algerians seized the opportunities that transition presented — even while the transition itself suffered interruptions and setbacks. Re-engagement in Algeria benefited from connections IDRC had made in the country years earlier, and from positive cooperation with Canadian diplomats in Ottawa and Algiers. But implementation took two years and more to reach significant levels of activity, in part because IDRC's own approaches to research were changing as a product of its normal corporate program review; execution was made all the more complex by personnel transfers. Ultimately, good projects materialized due to determined and enthusiastic partners in Algeria, and renewed applications of management energies at IDRC.

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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