

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



Photo: Karen Human Rights Group

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.

BURMA

BURMA IN THE 1990S RANKED AMONG THE MOST REPRESSIVE and self-isolated countries in the world. But the occasional appearance of a few hopeful signs of possible transition prompted IDRC's interest in the potential for development research. For about five years in mid-decade, IDRC conducted detailed assessments of the chances for political transition in Burma. The assessment measured the probability of change, the capacity and independence of Burmese researchers, and the likelihood of good research influencing policy and action. It also took into account the Canadian government's declared disapproval of Burma's dictatorship. In the end, IDRC decided against investing in programming for Burma. Yet the case illustrated the value of gathering careful intelligence for research decisions — and the difficulties of judging whether a transition is genuine or illusory.

Burma (Myanmar in its other name) was not entirely new to IDRC: the Centre had periodically supported development research in the country since the mid-1980s, mostly in projects managed by the International Rice Research Institute. By 1993, however, IDRC found reason to rethink its Burma strategy and contemplate a larger partnership with the country's research community. Seasoned IDRC staffers in the region detected several signs pointing to the possible approach of transition: official consideration of a new Burmese constitution; an evidently growing governmental focus on market economics and freer trade with neighbouring countries; and some initial steps toward the introduction of some multiparty democracy. True, Burma was still ruled by the violently authoritarian SLORC — the State Law and Order Restoration Council. But events from

time to time offered hope of at least pre-transitional moves to more open, less coercive governance.

Strategic exploration of Burma's research prospects followed three streams of fact-finding and analysis: making contact with the Burmese academic and research community to identify needs and capacity; forming a better real-time understanding of Burma's internal politics; and defining the limitations and opportunities presented by the Canadian government's insistent foreign policy stance against any legitimization of the SLORC regime.

In April 1994 three experienced IDRC officers (based in its Singapore office) visited Burma for a first-hand look. Aiming mostly to learn more about Burma's research organizations and assess research priorities, the group met officials in several government ministries, academic institutions, international organizations, and the Myanmar Medical Association, as well as local farmers. The mission reported no shortage of possibilities, well-functioning institutions, and well-trained and able researchers.

Even so, difficulties were equally apparent — as two more IDRC missions in 1995 seemed to confirm. For one, links between research and policy communities appeared practically nonexistent. For another, ministers in the ruling regime seemed to take decisions without any reliable consultation with professional civil servants (much less with any meaningful public participation). In other words, there was little evident demand in government for IDRC's kind of research — and little obvious opportunity for researchers to introduce their knowledge into the closed policy process.

There were other obstacles as well. In Burma's state of repression, there was scarcely any freedom to invite researchers or civil servants to international conferences or training events. It was hardly possible even to discuss political matters inside Burma — a disabling constraint if research was supposed to advance transition toward open and sustainable governance and development. And political prospects were mixed. In 1995, for example, the government granted a rough measure of freedom to Aung San Suu Kyi, the icon of Burma's democracy movement (and Nobel Peace Prize laureate). But the overall political context remained coercively restrictive.

The Canadian government's attitude toward Burma, meanwhile, was adamant in its condemnation. Senior IDRC managers, in the normal way, discussed prospects for development research in Burma with Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs officials in Ottawa and the region. Foreign Affairs (again in the normal way) made no forceful objections to potential IDRC engagement in Burma — as long as it did not tend to legitimize the dictators. (IDRC in any case was considering programming that would not directly involve SLORC appointees, but instead enlist collaboration among career professionals in government ministries.) The Canadian government's position seemed to stiffen

with every new clampdown in Burma; animosity toward the regime grew more explicit through 1996 and into 1997.

Perhaps partly as a consequence, two successive IDRC presidents expressed continuing doubts about spending scarce funds in a country with such risky prospects for real transition. These doubts were buttressed by the apparent deterioration of political conditions inside Burma. Still, the arguments for and against supporting research in Burma remained remarkably evenly balanced. The case for engagement began with the undeniable poverty of the Burmese people. It was a fact, moreover, that IDRC had successfully operated in other difficult surroundings. And there was the reasonable (and familiar) argument that it was better to engage than to isolate. The case against engagement was no less credible: no foreseeable connection between researchers and policymakers; even by the ordinary standards of repressive regimes, insufficient independence for researchers; skepticism among other international donors informed about Burma; no unambiguous transition under way or imminent; no synergy available with Canadian foreign policy; no strong endorsement from senior IDRC management.

All things considered, the prospects for development research in Burma did not look promising. In 1997, IDRC (itself under pressures of budget cuts) decided not to press ahead with any new program in Burma: existing small projects, mostly in agriculture and health, were allowed to lapse. Only one tiny project — sponsorship of a Burmese student to earn an MSc in Thailand — was subsequently delivered. In the years that followed, the SLORC reasserted its grip on power. Aung San Suu Kyi was returned to house arrest in a 2003 crackdown by the military. The parliament elected in 1990 never sat.

It is rarely easy to tell, at the time, whether a transition has begun. The signs are often contradictory. That is when other considerations can assume higher importance: the accessibility of able, independent researchers; the prospects for putting research findings to good use in policy and action; a foreign policy environment at least neutral if not supportive toward research initiatives; and a shared conviction among organization executives, regional managers, and program specialists that research programming is worth a try. All of this demands prudent and imaginative strategic intelligence to inform a dependable decision.

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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