

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



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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.

CAMBODIA

CAMBODIA HAS UNDERGONE A RADICAL TRANSITION from the devastations of civil war, foreign occupation, and the ferocious misrule of the Khmer Rouge. The 1991 Paris peace agreement established a ceasefire and committed Cambodians to democratic elections. An interim administration under United Nations supervision set conditions for civilian government. Elections in 1993 returned the country to the promise of a democratic future — and to the long work of sustainable government. From the earliest years of transition and throughout, IDRC has actively supported Cambodia's development research efforts.

Indeed, IDRC's engagement in Cambodia originated before the transition began — and fully demonstrates the potential for creative and patient opportunism in development research. As early as 1988 IDRC officers in Southeast Asia had turned their attention to the possibilities of involvement in Cambodia — framing a hypothetical Cambodian program as part of a Mekong-wide arrangement that might include Vietnam and Laos. At the time, programs in Thailand and Malaysia were maturing, while the needs of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were readily obvious. Moreover, IDRC managers had already formed contacts and friendships with expatriate Cambodian researchers eager to return home when they could to apply their knowledge to Cambodian recovery and development.

By 1991 a convergence of factors had prepared IDRC to make the most of a new peace in Cambodia. The country itself was finally opening, with manifest needs for research;

IDRC's well-connected staff knew able Cambodians ready to return and launch projects; IDRC was itself ready to shift programming into the Mekong area; and there was a strong IDRC interest in launching innovative new partnerships with other donors in the region. IDRC's entry into the Cambodian transition exhibited (as usual) multiple origins and interests.

Two senior IDRC officers, Singapore-based, traveled to Cambodia in 1991 and met the government's deputy minister of agriculture in an early fact-finding trip. This visit established what became a pattern in the early 1990s of interacting directly with high-level government officials and ministers. The pattern in part reflected official Cambodian enthusiasm for IDRC support, and in part followed from the reality that IDRC staffers were opening diplomatic doors for Canada in Phnom Penh.

The needs of Cambodia were immediately apparent and the pace of IDRC engagement quickened. By 1992, during the UN-mandated interim administration, small IDRC financings were supporting consultancies for policy support and advice. IDRC co-sponsored a 1993 international conference in Cambodia on environmental issues. And that same year — as elections successfully placed a new government in office — IDRC assigned a Southeast Asia program officer full-time to Cambodia. Meanwhile, IDRC officers and Canadian diplomats in the region kept each other informed as events progressed. Canada appointed an ambassador to Cambodia in 1993.

In 1994 IDRC opened its own "branch" office in Phnom Penh and launched an exceptionally busy program. No fewer than 10 IDRC projects were approved in 1994, valued at more than CA\$1 million. Most of the projects, and most of the funds, were dedicated to improving capacity for research and policy-making in the environmental and agricultural sectors — community-based forestry and fisheries management, for example, and training for farmers. But there were also projects with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Health (preparing a new generation of epidemiologists). Although the tempo of project approvals subsided in subsequent years, a total of 25 projects (CA\$3.8 million in IDRC financing) were undertaken in the 1994-97 period. In the decade since, IDRC has continued to foster research in community forestry, sustainable fisheries, public access to the Internet, and Indochina's regional labour market.

In 1996 IDRC closed its Phnom Penh branch office while continuing its programming in Cambodia; "being there" had served its purpose — and demonstrated some of the limits on what a very small country office can do in a very complicated transition. The office, with its one professional staffer and five administrative personnel, valuably established high-level relationships in important government ministries, providing strategic intelligence for IDRC decision-making and on-the-ground leadership for young projects. In a post-conflict

country with weak institutional capacity, it was especially helpful to have resident insight. Knowing the players counts heavily in these circumstances.

Yet the experience of the Cambodia office taught cautionary lessons for other cases. In the first place, staffing a country office with a single professional can lead to narrow focus: If the officer is a specialist in environment and natural resource management, projects reaching approval stage might tend to cluster in those same areas, as they did in Cambodia. This is not to say that early IDRC projects were mischosen. On the contrary, analysis showed Cambodia's need for research in those areas, and other donors (including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme) were concentrating on other questions. But the experience signals the danger of missing opportunities.

A second lesson from Cambodia goes to the difficulty — and the importance — of sensing early the institutional politics at play during transition. Officers closely involved in Cambodia programming recall the early IDRC decision to situate projects mainly in Cambodia's Environment Ministry — and wonder still if that was a strategic mistake. As the transition unfolded, it became clear that control over natural resources actually resided more in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. Would that have been a stronger, better-funded partner? Or did the Environment Ministry make for a more willing, innovative, and risk-tolerant partner in the research ventures that IDRC was supporting? These questions are never easy to answer with certainty as a transition proceeds. But they are always worth asking.

A third point arising from the Cambodia case is that supporting development research in transitions often starts with support for capacity building — in research and in policy-making. Much of the early IDRC effort in Cambodia was invested in new capacity, whether with government ministries, research organizations, local communities, or academic institutions. Projects typically began with consultants, often newly returned Cambodians, in the lead; later phases were more usually locally led.

Generally, this was more obviously research in transition than on transition. But below the surface the distinction was less convincing. Enhancing the capacity of local farmers or a coastal fishing village to explore and debate options to improve their own livelihoods might not seem politically momentous. On the other hand, empowering people with the knowledge, practices, and self-confidence of shared development can represent profound and lasting political change — the definition of sustainable transition in any country.

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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