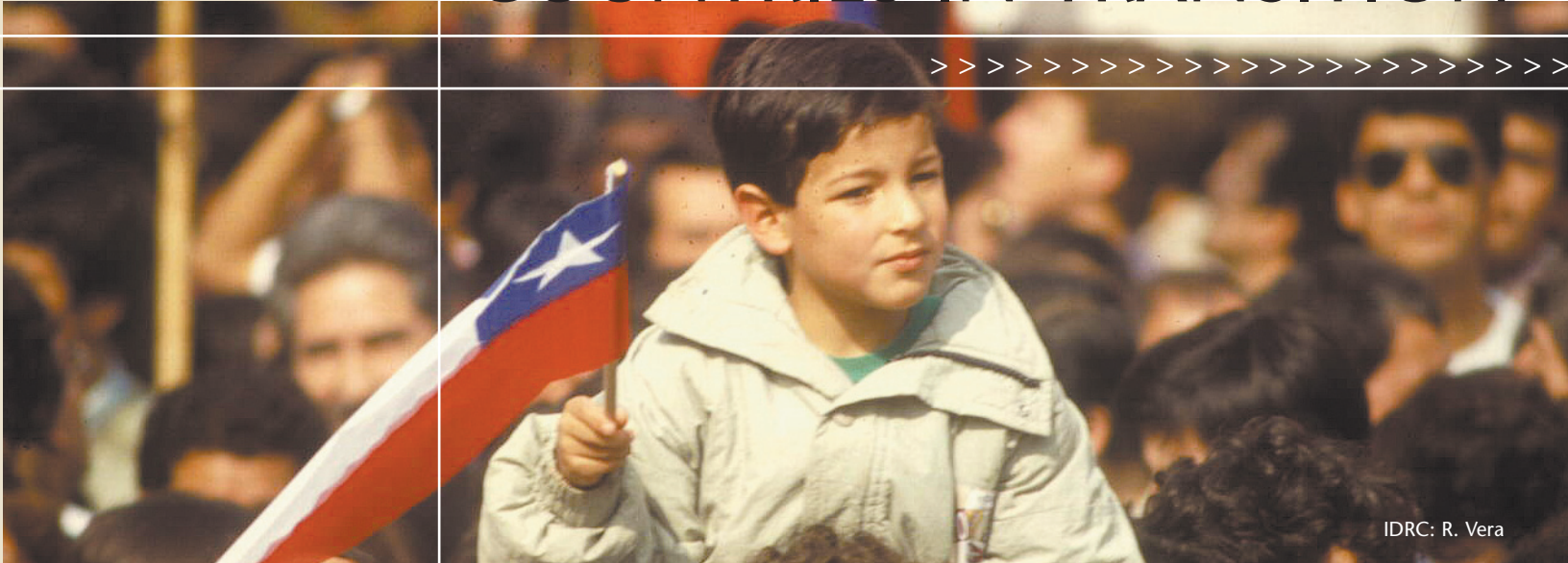


# DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH IN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION



IDRC: R. Vera

*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.*

## SOUTHERN CONE

IN THE 1970S, THE COUNTRIES OF SOUTH AMERICA'S Southern Cone shared most of the common and ruinous features of their dictatorships: murder, torture, persecution of democratic political movements, purges of university faculties — and the terrifying phenomenon of disappearances. Among researchers and scholars, none were more threatened than social scientists, whose probing work and discoveries often challenged the regimes themselves. In Chile alone, some 3 000 social scientists left the country after the 1973 coup; in 1980, more than 500 professors were fired from Chilean universities in a single semester. The coercive suppression of social science research menaced lives and livelihoods — and undercut the region's prospects for future development.

IDRC's Board of Governors responded in 1978 by approving an unprecedented program of special grants to research centres and individual researchers in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. This was not an easy or uncontentious decision for Board members. These were grants to foster and maintain institutions, not for specific projects — a significant departure from ordinary IDRC approaches. Furthermore, some on the Board hesitated to approve grants to researchers engaged in explicitly political explorations of social inequalities and governmental misrule. And finally, there was no transition evident in these countries: far from seizing on a moment of political change, IDRC this time was acting to preserve the spirit and skills of disciplined inquiry against determined and entrenched military dictatorships. Support from IDRC, and from several other foreign donors, was all the more needed because social science researchers, driven out of

universities and other publicly funded institutions, now depended on outside financing for their newly created private research entities.

As it happened, there was another element of urgency. The Ford Foundation, active in the region for several years by then, was in 1978 considering a withdrawal from Chile. This further encouraged IDRC to launch its own program, and it led to informal agreements with SAREC (the research unit of Sweden's International Development Cooperation Agency) and the Washington-based Inter-American Foundation to help replace the Ford funding. Here, as in other cases, supporting development research was greatly enhanced by consultation and coordination among donors for maximum effect.

The first stage of the new IDRC program, from 1978 to 1980, began with grants totaling CA\$300 000 to four organizations in Argentina and Chile. Together, they served to underwrite research in economic policy, education, the state's role in national development, and issues of urban and rural development. Financing went to institutions suffering particular vulnerability because they were unpopular with the regimes in power. And for the most part, funds went to researchers already known to IDRC — people with demonstrated ability, and willing to stay and work in their own countries despite the hazards and adversities.

IDRC undertook an extensive evaluation of the program in 1980; strategic information gathering included consultations with other donors, and visits to Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Chile. The evaluation, conducted by IDRC's social sciences division, concluded that early experience in the grants program had been successful, and it proposed criteria for future funding. In summary, these criteria provided that grants specify three-year staffing and budget plans; set out sources of other funding; limit IDRC funding to 25 to 35 percent of the recipient institution's total budget; and limit total grants to no more than 10 percent of the social sciences division's yearly appropriations budget.

This thorough review informed the Board's approval of further funding in 1981. Again, this program fell outside the usual framework of IDRC research programming — it was more for institutional maintenance and less project-driven than most IDRC collaborations. In fact, there was a determination that recipients' research agendas remain homegrown in spite of heavy reliance on resources from outside donors. This meant IDRC money would sometimes be spent on research questions beyond the priorities that defined IDRC's own program structures.

IDRC funding supported work by established researchers while enabling training for younger professionals. And the research undertaken was notably diverse. In Chile and Argentina, researchers explored higher education under military dictatorships and the rise of independent academic centres. In Chile, peasant farming techniques were examined to understand cropping, machinery, and

labour practices. In Uruguay, IDRC helped an independent study centre expand library facilities, teach, and extend scholarships.

From 1978 to 1986 the program disbursed grants in 17 projects, totaling more than CA\$3 million. By the end of that period, transitions were taking hold in the region. Argentina's dictatorship ended in 1983, Uruguay's in 1985. As a result, IDRC's Board agreed in 1986 to phase out the program and move support for Southern Cone research to IDRC's regular operations. Chile's turn to democratic government did not happen until 1990, but IDRC support for research there continued uninterrupted through ordinary programming mechanisms.

By flexibly adapting to the repressions of dictatorships, IDRC — with other donors — helped social scientists in Southern Cone countries maintain their research and teaching for years before the onset of transition. When transitions began, the work of these researchers contributed to the hard course of democratization — preserving pluralism and informing new policies. Indeed, recipients of IDRC grants in some cases assumed senior posts in post-dictatorship governments. The program was a high-risk innovation for IDRC, undertaken carefully and with support from other knowledgeable donors. But it was a risk rewarded by the talent, courage, and achievement of partner researchers in the region — and by the transitions they helped create.

*This case study 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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