

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.

WEST BANK AND GAZA

PALESTINIANS HAVE BEEN BESET BY VIOLENCE, poverty, and social dislocation for more than half a century. At times, imagining transition toward a prosperous peace has seemed fancifully optimistic. Yet change has occurred; progress sometimes follows reversals. And Palestinians have proven themselves capable of productive development research under the harshest conditions of danger and privation. This is research that can prepare a stronger transition for the future — and inform better governance for the present. Supporting this research compels fortitude, and repays patience in relationships of trust.

Twenty years of IDRC participation in Palestinian research have demonstrated the value of exploiting even the smallest progress when transition is otherwise failing. In all, IDRC has contributed more than CA\$10 million to almost 70 research projects in the West Bank and Gaza since the mid-1980s. Each phase of this program has been shaped by the advances and reversals that define relations between Palestinians and Israelis. And each phase, consequently, has demanded a constant and vigilant analysis of the West Bank and Gaza's social, political, and economic needs and prospects.

PHASE ONE: 1983 TO THE OSLO ACCORDS (1993)

Alertness pays. The origins of IDRC programming in the West Bank and Gaza can be traced to an inconspicuous approach made to the president of IDRC in 1983 by a Palestinian graduate student at Ottawa's Carleton University. (By chance, an IDRC staffer

at the time had taken part in supervising the student's thesis.) The proposal to IDRC was a modest request for support to a rural research centre at An-Najah National University in Nablus. But it was enough to catch the president's notice, and it led him to broach the idea of Palestinian research support with Canadian ambassadors in the Middle East and with high-level Canadian officials in Ottawa. IDRC officers were meanwhile dispatched to the West Bank and Gaza for first-hand assessments and returned with recommendations for engagement. The strategic information-gathering also included consultation with donors already in the region, among them the Near East, Rockefeller, and Ford foundations and the World Bank. Potential research themes emerged, along with a distinct IDRC advantage: As an independent institution and not a department of any government, IDRC would be freer than most government agencies to work in territories that did not constitute a state.

The quiet approach to IDRC — and the quick response — triggered prompt action and the start of almost continuous IDRC programming in the West Bank and Gaza that has lasted ever since. The first project, begun in 1984, examined issues of labour migration in the deteriorating economy of the Gaza Strip, and resulting resettlement outside the territory. This was a small project conducted with the Arab Studies Society, a West Bank non-governmental organization (NGO), and contained elements of research by highly qualified Palestinian social scientists, along with training for newer researchers.

Another early project — in collaboration with the Arab Scientific Institute for Research — explored the potential for planting fast-growing olive trees. This seemingly apolitical subject actually addressed the Israeli policy of expropriating “uncultivated” land. By accelerating olive production, Palestinian farmers could stake a claim to their property. These first projects, like others to follow, generally looked for ways to cope with the Israeli presence: they were more or less (and inescapably) political in their purpose, whether or not designed to promote transition. The political overlay in IDRC programming was emphasized during this pre-Oslo phase by the reluctance of the usual donor governments to establish their own relationships with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

PHASE TWO: 1993 TO 2000 AND THE SECOND INTIFADA

The 1993 Oslo Accords (and the follow-on 1995 “Interim Agreement” on Gaza and the West Bank) served as a catalyst for a new round of intelligence gathering and analysis at IDRC. The Accords generated new hope for Palestinian transition, particularly after the violence of the first Intifada in 1987-88. A new sense of security — and a readjustment of Canadian foreign policy in favour of engagement with Palestinians — opened fresh possibilities for enlarging IDRC programming in the region. Visits to the West Bank and Gaza by senior IDRC managers in 1994 confirmed the evidence of a strategic opportunity for expanding IDRC

activities. Through the 1990s, funding increased and the diversity of projects widened.

Environment and natural resource management, social sciences, and peace-building initiatives figured prominently in this phase. In 1992 (before Oslo and as part of the 1991 Madrid Conference outcomes), IDRC was already contributing research for regional working groups on water and refugees: the Canadian government was active in both and held the gavel for the group on refugees. As well, IDRC has managed an Expert and Advisory Services Fund, financed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Department of Foreign Affairs, to support contributions by Palestinian, Israeli, Jordanian, Lebanese, and Syrian researchers. Other IDRC-supported projects aimed at strengthening the West Bank and Gaza's own capacity for making policy for economic development, education, health, water management, small-business promotion, and similar imperatives of good governance.

Throughout these projects was a determined focus on fostering social participation — especially for women, and specifically through the vehicle of NGOs. Some projects brought Palestinians together with Israelis, as when Palestinians and Israelis cooperated for joint management of their shared Mountain Aquifer. More than 40 projects were undertaken in this phase, totaling almost CA\$7 million.

PHASE THREE: 2000 TO 2004

The outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000 occurred as IDRC was initiating a new round of strategic assessment in the West Bank and Gaza, concentrating on support for democratization and peacebuilding. Overall, the approach by then had been to support scholars and NGOs — not the Palestinian Authority — but to encourage civil society partners to establish their own links with the Authority so as to ensure policy relevance and influence. IDRC's 2000 study re-examined and confirmed the utility of this approach.

Another study, conducted the same year, looked specifically at problems of conducting research amid the violent disorder and repression of the Second Intifada period. It came to three powerful conclusions. First, Palestinians were showing individual and institutional capacity for useful research even in the violence. Second, IDRC project support was contributing to openness and dialogue despite the conflict. And third, IDRC activities were consistent with the Canadian government's participation in whatever remained of the "peace process" — although IDRC operations were still at arm's length from the Canadian government's diplomacy.

These findings were reinforced by the separate analyses done by IDRC managers in peacebuilding and economic policy areas: both found lively capacity for research by Palestinians, undoubted need for research, and favourable niches for IDRC support. Indigenous capacity for research, in spite of the violence, set the West Bank and

Gaza apart from other conflict zones where research had been judged impossible or unproductive.

Remarkably, project funding continued unabated through this violent phase. In the four years 2001-04, 20 projects were begun totaling CA\$3.5 million. They focused on three main areas: resource management (water especially); economic policy; and peacebuilding and reconstruction (the largest of the three concentrations). Peace and conflict projects have studied the Intifada itself; statelessness and refugees; impacts of urbanization on land use; and the state of the information society.

PHASE FOUR: 2004 TO THE PRESENT

Even by the standards of Palestinian upheavals, the turbulence lately prevailing in the region has been striking. Yasser Arafat's death in 2004; the election of a new Palestinian president in 2004; the election of the Hamas-dominated parliament in 2006; the end of the Sharon government in Israel; Israel's 2006 conflict with Lebanon — all defied any confident forecast for Palestinian transition. But the confusions have only intensified the necessity of careful, continuing, strategic information gathering and analysis. The need for better governance in the West Bank and Gaza has never been more urgent. And in fact, in some slender dimensions, preparation for transition has proceeded: Research goes on; academics and activists meet at home and abroad; new knowledge still circulates; policy approaches evolve. Despite the violence and political turmoil, Palestinians continue to build a sophisticated capacity for relevant development research.

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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International Development Research Centre

PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9

Tel.: 613-236-6163

Fax: 613-238-7230

Email: info@idrc.ca