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International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Framework for Foresight at IDRC

Rationale, definition, and approach



Canada

Background

[IDRC's Strategy 2030](#) notes that the Centre will maintain a longer-term view and “engage in foresight to address the new research questions and dynamics that emerge” in today’s rapidly changing world. This intention stems from an understanding that the current global order exhibits unprecedented social, environmental, and technological challenges that intersect in dynamic and unpredictable ways, and that to address these we need to understand how actors will work collaboratively to enhance capacity and improve efficient action.

Foresight work holds potential for supporting Strategy 2030 objectives by ensuring the research we support anticipates and responds to emerging needs and challenges. Foresight work can also inform future business decisions based on analysis of emerging risks and opportunities in our operating environment. If implemented in a demand-driven, user-focused, and consultative way, foresight work should:

- help to clarify, refine, and test the core assumptions that underlie our decision-making on programming and operations,
- provide us with a window into emerging issues that may be the focus of programming in the future, and
- identify developments that could fundamentally change or disrupt an issue or system in unexpected ways, with potentially high impact if they do.

A key strength of foresight work is the dynamic and consultative process that it offers for sharing and challenging mental models across different stakeholders with varying world views. This means that *how* we do foresight work will be key for generating new ideas and thinking – it is not about papers whose shelf life quickly expires.

Working definition of foresight

IDRC is adopting a flexible approach and definition of foresight that is fit for purpose, and that reflects that we are at the early stages of integrating foresight thinking into our work:

Foresight focuses on future-oriented analysis, using a range of methods and tools. It helps the Centre and grantees anticipate future evolutions, disruptions, and scenarios that could influence our and their work in unexpected ways, including the operating environments in which research for development takes place. The longer time horizon considered through foresight, on the order of a decade or two, will help inform our strategic directions, allowing us to better respond to emerging priorities, and also contributing to more effective risk management through analysis that informs planning and decision-making.

Distinguishing traits and **criteria for foresight work at IDRC include the following:**

- a) Sheds light on trends and trajectories in national, regional, or global landscapes, particularly relating to frontier areas and looking out 10-20 years, that require attention from research and international development communities.
- b) Includes foresight-specific tools or methods including, for example, but not exclusively, scenario planning, trend analysis, environmental scanning, and scanning for weak signals.

- c) Explores new prospective futures that may inform strategic directions, development effectiveness, or Centre practices.
- d) Employs strategic conversations and consultations designed to challenge assumptions, question mental models, and leverage the perspectives of diverse stakeholders.
- e) Involves processes and products that have a clear use and set of users.

A hybrid and graduated framework

If foresight work is to be effective, IDRC's approach should be *hybrid* and *graduated* in nature.

A **hybrid** approach implies two things: First, it selects and combines different tools and methods for future-oriented research and thinking and makes accommodation for the fact that IDRC itself is on a learning curve in relation to foresight. Second, it combines internally and externally focused foresight work, with IDRC explicitly supporting future-thinking organisations, networks, and communities of practice and their futures-oriented work in developing country contexts. This external-facing work will feed IDRC's internal thinking at the corporate level, as an organisational practice to support the generation of new ideas for both programming and strategic corporate decision-making. This approach will help to ensure that analyses generated from foresight work will make best use of IDRC networks and the expertise and insights that exist across the regions of the world in which IDRC operates. It will also position the Centre to engage as a peer with global, Canadian, and developing world partners and build its own knowledge and capacity as we advance along our own foresight learning curve. It will be particularly important to build IDRC understanding and learning around how foresight work can contribute to future research agendas that IDRC might support.

A **graduated** approach means that during the initial implementation of foresight work IDRC's investments and expectations will be modest and strategic. Over time we will incrementally build knowledge, networks of grantees and partners, and different uses of foresight. As such, our work will include:

- Ongoing monitoring and learning for course correction and adaptation of the approach. At three-year Strategy check-ins, IDRC will engage in deeper reflection and evaluation of experiences with foresight.
- Participatory spaces to share, debate, and connect the results of foresight across programs and branches.
- Being on the look-out for opportunities to clearly and explicitly link foresight to risk management thinking, annual planning and prioritization processes, and strategic reflections. This will enable better investment planning and optimal use of the funds to advance key priorities identified for the Centre, especially in support of multi-year directions.

Proposed foresight work investment categories

1. Strategy 2030 deep dive exercises: Assumptions-testing studies with accompanying engagement processes that look more closely at factors in the operating environment influencing the achievement of our objectives and research outcomes. At the corporate level, this could help build greater understanding of trends and further develop thinking around our three core objectives. Thematic

studies could also inform thinking for programming on the more distant horizon.

2. Global mega-trends and shifts: Horizon scanning and other foresight exercises with IDRC staff, grantees, and/or external stakeholders to explore new prospective futures that fall completely outside the current programming map or operational directions.

Indicative examples could include:

- The future of women's equality in the post-COVID world.
- The lost decade of development in the aftermath of COVID: Growing public debt and the implications for the developing world.
- Researcher mobility and virtual higher education in the post-COVID world: Implications and opportunities for developing countries.
- Foresight to develop new funding platforms for science systems (already underway).
- IDRC's evolving position in the international research for development landscape (refresh of June 2017 study at strategy mid-point).

3. Regional foresight: Includes operating environment or landscape scans that analyze developments, scenarios, risks, and opportunities that are contextually specific or geo-political in nature. Such work would build on the identification of issues and trends by regional offices.

Indicative examples could include:

- Possible development implications of multi-causal forced migration in Latin America.
- The rise of private philanthropy in Africa and implications for science and research.
- Possible inter-generational development implications of a "lost generation" of grandparents post-COVID (e.g., in India).

4. Supporting future-oriented practice by IDRC and its grantees: As a key aspect of IDRC's research support mandate and in parallel to building its own knowledge and use of foresight, includes mapping the foresight terrain and capacity building.

Indicative examples could include:

- Mapping the landscape of developing-country actors actively producing foresight and future-oriented studies.
- Small grants to support networks of foresight researchers and practitioners in the Global South.
- Small grants to build foresight and future-oriented capacity in think tanks to address post-COVID futures.