



IDRC · CRDI

International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Evaluation at IDRC

Updated 2024



Evaluation at IDRC

This document describes IDRC's current approach to evaluation under [Strategy 2030](#). It is used by staff to explain our approach to our grantees, funding partners, the Canadian public and to those interested in evaluating research for development.

Evaluation has been an important part of IDRC's work since the Centre was established in 1970. There has been a long-standing dual focus of ensuring high-quality evaluation contributes to IDRC's mandate as well as innovating in the field of evaluation more broadly. In 1993, a dedicated Evaluation Unit was created and this evolved into the current Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team. The MEL team sits within IDRC's Strategy, Regions, and Policy Branch and reports to its Vice President.

The document is divided into two sections, plus annexes. It starts with the purposes and principles that guide evaluation at IDRC. The second section describes IDRC's evaluation system and provides an overview of resources, including tools, approaches, and guidelines that were developed by IDRC for evaluating research for development. The annexes describe what our funding partners and grantees can expect when working with IDRC on evaluation.¹

Section 1: Purposes and Principles of Evaluation

Purposes of evaluation at IDRC

Evaluation helps us realize our goals. It is a strategic intervention that supports and furthers IDRC's mission to fund research for a more sustainable and inclusive world. IDRC conducts evaluations to strengthen the processes and results of the research we support, and to increase our understanding of the contribution of research to development.

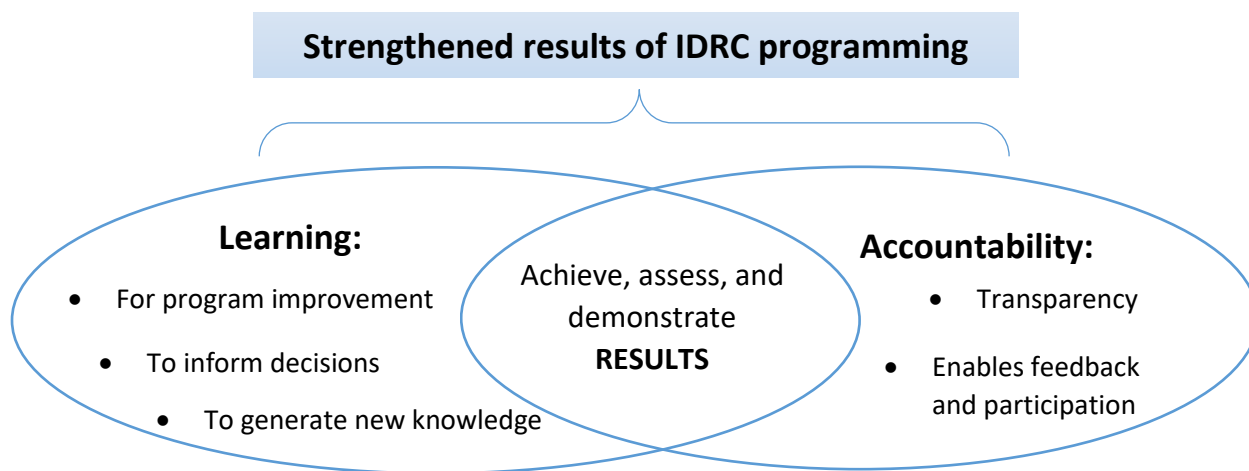
Evaluation at IDRC contributes to both learning and accountability (see Figure 1):

1. *Learning*: Evaluation supports our organization to be results-oriented, reflective, and questioning; to articulate the core values that underpin our work; and to use evidence to test assumptions and make decisions. More broadly, evaluation generates knowledge about research and development.
2. *Accountability*: Transparent and publicly accessible evaluation demonstrates to the Canadian public and our funding partners how their investments contribute to

¹ This document specifically focuses on evaluation of IDRC programming and strategy. This is distinct from the evaluative research IDRC funds as part of its programming (e.g. impact evaluations of government policies).

positive change. IDRC’s commitment to high-quality evaluation ensures robust and relevant evidence is available for decision-making. As we work with our grantees toward common goals, evaluations are part of our commitment to document and assess our joint efforts. Evaluations provide opportunities for feedback about the quality and relevance of the Centre’s work from diverse perspectives, including stakeholders in the Global South.

Figure 1: Purposes of evaluation at IDRC



Guiding principles for evaluation at IDRC

The practice of evaluation at IDRC is guided by four principles: utility; quality; collaboration and shared benefit; and knowledge sharing and transparency.

Utility

The decision to evaluate should be strategic, not routine. IDRC is selective in determining when and what issues, projects, and programs are evaluated. The choice of what to evaluate is based on need (i.e., on the risk, learning potential, priority, phase, and size of the investment). Each evaluation is designed to meet the needs of its [intended users](#), including IDRC management, funding partners, program staff, and/or grantees. Evaluations should produce actionable findings to help us test theories of change, learn from successes and failures, and improve strategy. The participation of intended users in evaluation processes helps ensure relevance and ownership of the evaluation findings.

Quality

Evaluation should meet high quality standards. Quality includes the utility of evaluation, the use of rigorous methods, and safeguarding ethical standards. The practice of evaluation, by nature, is not value-neutral; it must include diverse perspectives and address inequalities in the evaluation process. IDRC recognizes the need to consider

power dynamics in evaluation design and to adopt evaluation practices that foster equity and inclusion.

Collaboration and shared benefit

Evaluation should be designed to meet collective needs and be an asset for those being evaluated. IDRC negotiates the purpose, design and governance of evaluation with funding partners to avoid duplicating evaluation efforts, and to ensure utility for all parties.² The Centre recognizes that evaluation engages grantee organizations and requires their contribution, so any participation should be of benefit to them. IDRC seeks opportunities to build in grantees' perspectives, information needs, and uses into evaluation designs.³

Knowledge sharing and transparency

Evaluation findings as well as lessons about the practice and theory of evaluation should be documented and shared. Knowledge sharing helps strengthen evaluation capacity both within IDRC and among our grantees, and ensures evaluation remains relevant to the issues and priorities for development and development research.

Evaluations should be publicly accessible. Evaluations commissioned by IDRC staff and by our grantees as part of their IDRC grant are available through the Centre's public [digital library](#).⁴

Section 2: IDRC's Evaluation System

IDRC has developed a system that involves centralized evaluation managed by IDRC's MEL team at the corporate level, and decentralized evaluation managed by IDRC programs with support from the MEL team at program and project levels. There is no standard evaluation design, and each is tailored to meet specific intended uses, aligned with the principles above. Formal evaluation is typically conducted by external experts. Internal assessment can be conducted by IDRC staff and / or facilitated by external experts.

Levels and types of evaluation at IDRC

Evaluations managed by IDRC's MEL team at the **corporate level**:

² See Annex 1 for an overview of how IDRC approaches evaluation in funding partnerships.

³ See Annex 2 for an overview of how IDRC approaches evaluation with our grantees.

⁴ Public access is restricted when evaluation [quality](#) is unacceptable or the likelihood that the findings would cause harm, particularly to grantees or communities, outweighs the benefits of its disclosure. Critical findings are not a reason to restrict access to an evaluation.

- *Strategic evaluations* help IDRC gauge how well it is delivering on the core objectives of [Strategy 2030](#) (investing in high-quality research, sharing knowledge for greater uptake and use, and mobilizing alliances for impact) as well as other cross-cutting thematic issues. This complements corporate performance monitoring and internal assessment of progress against expected outcomes.
- *Program evaluations* provide a systematic assessment of the effectiveness of IDRC's program implementation and the relevance and significance of Program results. Program Evaluations are a set of discrete yet concurrent and commonly structured evaluations, conducted every five years, that support public accountability and provide new insights on the Centre's performance. Subsequent meta-evaluation, following the program evaluations, facilitate further organization-level learning.

Evaluations managed by IDRC programs at the **program level**:

- *Evaluation in partnerships* focuses on programming that is co-funded by multiple partners. As described in Annex 1, evaluations are designed to meet the accountability and learning needs of each funder involved. Large partnerships generally have independent evaluations built into the program design. In most cases, IDRC manages these evaluations. In the case that a partner manages the evaluation, IDRC expects to be consulted in evaluation planning and process.
- *Initiative / cohort evaluations* are tailored to IDRC program and grantee learning needs and typically provide input into future programming directions. They can focus on a portfolio(s) of projects, organization(s), issue(s), or program strategies. They may be formative or summative, and conducted internally or externally.

Evaluations managed by IDRC programs at the **project level**:

- *Project evaluations* are normally commissioned by IDRC Program Officers or grantees. Not all IDRC-funded projects are evaluated, and this decision is made strategically based on need (i.e., on the project risk, learning potential, priority, phase, and/or size of the investment).
- *Project completion reports* are end-of-project assessments made by IDRC Program Officers that capture results achieved and significant learning. They complement the technical reports provided by project grantees.

Evaluation governance

Within IDRC's evaluation system, oversight and responsibility for planning, commissioning, conducting, and using evaluation is shared.

- The *Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team* within the Policy and Evaluation Division supports IDRC staff and management in their evaluation roles by providing

technical guidance and capacity building. They lead adjustments to the evaluation system and the development of innovative evaluation approaches to keep pace with IDRC programming and priorities. The MEL team manages organizational-level evaluations, as well as program-level evaluations in cases where independence from program managers is deemed essential.

- *Program staff and grantees* commission, engage in, support, and use findings from high-quality evaluations. When appropriate, they seek opportunities to build their evaluation capacities and develop or adapt evaluation methods relevant to their programming.
- *Senior Management* promotes a culture of learning from success and failure. They allot resources for evaluation, identify evaluation opportunities, incorporate evaluation findings into their decision-making and write responses to both standardized and individual program and partnership evaluations. Senior Management keeps track of evaluation plans to ensure the Centre has adequate evaluation processes to support accountability and learning. With respect to coverage and frequency of evaluations, IDRC practice is in keeping with the Canadian Treasury Board's [Policy on Results](#) that states that, in general, programming is independently evaluated once every five years.
- The *Board of Governors* holds IDRC accountable for all programs and partnerships they approve. The Board receives findings from significant program and partnership evaluations, with corresponding management responses.

Evaluation approach and resources

Evaluation planning

IDRC starts planning for evaluation during program design, this includes deciding what data and evidence needs to be collected and tracked over time to understand progress and enable assessment of results. Clearly defining expected results, strategies that will help achieve them, and the timeframe and milestones in which they are expected are important components of evaluation planning and program management. Hand in hand with evaluation, IDRC uses monitoring data at the corporate, program and project levels to support accountability for results as well as ongoing learning to inform adaptation and course correction. IDRC collects a mix of qualitative outcome stories and quantitative indicator data to support its monitoring efforts and inform evaluation.

Once an evaluation plan is confirmed, our use-oriented approach means we start by clarifying the [intended uses](#) of an evaluation for each user (e.g. IDRC management, staff, grantees, funding partners, etc.). Being specific and transparent about what is expected of an evaluation allows for more explicit and focused planning, more effective process,

and more appropriate approaches. It also ensures that evaluation users are prepared to take up findings. Examples of intended uses include:

- *Learning and improvement*: formative evaluations often focus on course-correction and tend to be more open-ended, gathering data about strengths and weaknesses to inform the program.
- *Capturing ongoing insights*: developmental evaluations provide right time feedback to guide adaptation of the program in emergent and complex environments.
- *Informing future programs*: summative evaluations are usually conducted towards the end of a program to judge the overall effectiveness or worth, and to draw lessons for other ongoing and next generation programming.
- *Transparency and stewardship*: IDRC uses evaluation to publicly communicate our progress and achievement – which includes success and failure.

Commissioning evaluation

Those who commission evaluations are responsible for setting up and managing a high-quality evaluation process. While they generally rely on the expertise of evaluators to design methodology, commissioners set the overall parameters for an evaluation, including timeline, budget and overall approach. They define what is to be evaluated, who will be involved, the questions, and what evidence is most relevant. IDRC has supported the development of an interactive [Manager's Guide to Evaluation](#) that IDRC staff and grantees can use for managing an evaluation that is conducted by external or internal evaluators. The guide is available on [Better Evaluation](#).

The guide supports decision making throughout the process of an evaluation, from planning its purpose and scope, designing it, conducting it, reporting findings and supporting use of its findings (See Figure 3 for a complete list of steps).

Figure 3: Manager's Guide to Evaluation

STEPS IN THE COMMISSIONING PROCESS

1. Decide how decisions about the evaluation will be made
2. Scope the evaluation
3. Develop the Terms of Reference (ToR)
4. Engage the evaluation team
5. Manage development of the evaluation methodology
6. Manage development of the evaluation work plan including logistics
7. Manage implementation of the evaluation
8. Guide production of quality report(s)
9. Disseminate reports and support use of evaluation

Conducting Evaluation

Evaluating research for development involves several unique features when compared to evaluating other international development interventions, or other types of research. IDRC has developed and contributed to the creation of several [frameworks and tools](#) (available on IDRC's evaluation website) for assessing the outcomes of research for development, a few of which are highlighted below. They are often further adapted by IDRC programs and our grantees in their evaluation work. The use of these frameworks and tools should be guided by IDRC's four principles for evaluation outlined in Section 1 above: utility; quality; collaboration and shared benefit; and knowledge sharing and transparency.

Research for development has long, non-linear results chains. Typically, there are many incremental and complex changes in a causal chain between conducting applied research, achieving immediate and intermediate outcomes, and transformative, sustainable impact of improved well-being for people and the environment. When assessing the results of research for development initiatives, it is essential to recognize that change pathways are frequently non-linear, context plays a critical role, and complexity is a key feature of understanding how change happens and who is involved in that change.

- Suggested resource: [Outcome Mapping](#) is an approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation that puts people at the center of development, defines outcomes as changes in behavior, and helps measure contribution to complex change processes.

Research for development outcomes are different from development intervention outcomes. Research for development outcomes can include, for example, [strengthening capacity](#) of the individuals, organizations, and networks doing the research and using the resulting knowledge. Outcome evaluations might focus on the influence of research on technological development, innovation, or policy and practice changes.

- Suggested resource: [Knowledge to policy. Making the most of development research](#) illustrates how research can contribute to better governance in several ways: by encouraging open inquiry and debate, by empowering people with the knowledge to hold governments accountable, and by enlarging the array of policy options and solutions available to the policy process.
- Suggested resource: [Scaling Science](#) introduces a practical approach to scaling the positive impacts of research and innovation and provides a set of guiding principles for assessing, understanding, and improving scaling in research for development.

Evaluating research for development is different from evaluating academic research. Typically, academic research evaluation is done through deliberative means (such as peer review) and analytics (such as bibliometrics). IDRC has developed a holistic

approach that acknowledges scientific merit as a necessary but insufficient condition for judging research quality, and the role of multiple stakeholders and potential users in determining the effectiveness of research (in terms of its relevance, use and impact).

- Suggested resource: [Research Quality Plus \(RQ+\)](#) Assessment Framework includes scientific rigor as well as research legitimacy, importance, and positioning for use as dimensions of research quality. It also takes into consideration contextual factors (enabling or constraining factors) either within the research endeavor or in the external environment and includes customizable assessment rubrics that make use of both qualitative and quantitative measures.

ANNEX 1: Evaluation in Funding Partnerships

IDRC [co-funds several programs](#) with other funders. Conducting evaluation in various types of partnerships requires flexibility and transparency.

We recognize each organization has a different culture and expectations when it comes to evaluation. As IDRC develops new funding partnerships, we set out clear and detailed plans for managing the program evaluation. To create these plans, we seek to understand our partners' evaluation approaches, as well as what they expect from evaluation, how they use evaluation results, and if they have requirements around evaluation questions, scope or methodology.

IDRC approach to evaluation in funding partnerships follows our guiding principles of utility, quality, collaboration and shared benefit, and knowledge sharing and transparency.

We build in results-oriented thinking from the outset. Preliminary results frameworks are developed at the beginning of a funding partnership along with an agreement on an appropriate level of flexibility to evolve over time. It is typical for a more concrete understanding of intended results to emerge in the early months after project grants are approved. With this increased understanding, the Centre refines results and develops a more detailed monitoring and evaluation framework in consultation with our funding partners.

We earmark resources for evaluation.

We design evaluations to meet the accountability and learning needs of each partner involved. We coordinate to avoid duplicative evaluations. Evidence from evaluations helps us revisit theories of change, test assumptions, and improve implementation strategies.

We clarify roles and timelines. We use established program governance mechanisms to approve evaluation plans, and we agree on roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authorities. Where necessary, we establish separate decision-making or advisory groups to involve in evaluations. These can include members of our partners' evaluation divisions. We jointly develop terms of reference that document our agreements and guide the implementation of the evaluation. Timelines consider funding partners' reporting requirements and decision-making processes.

ANNEX 2: Evaluation guidance for Grantees

This annex draws out implications of Evaluation at IDRC for our grantees. Grantees may be involved in evaluations that IDRC commissions, and grantees may commission evaluations themselves using IDRC funds.

When IDRC commissions evaluations of programs, partnerships or strategic objectives, grantees may be asked to provide input during design or in data gathering. IDRC-commissioned evaluations are made public, so grantees will have access to the findings of those evaluations.

As part of IDRC's utilization-focused approach to evaluation, the decision to evaluate projects is strategic, not routine. While all projects are expected to define and monitor their results, not all individual projects are formally externally evaluated. If either IDRC or the grantee decides it is useful to evaluate a project, they can build it into their plans and [budgets](#). Project-level evaluations may be commissioned by IDRC alone, jointly with grantees, or by grantees alone.

When grantees commission evaluations, they discuss the scope of the evaluation with their program officer. When grantees are the primary user of the evaluation, studies may focus on a project, or go beyond, to a broader organizational strategy or performance area. IDRC expects these evaluations to meet high quality and ethical standards. As part of IDRC's commitment to share learning, the grantee-commissioned evaluations that IDRC funds are made public, subject to our normal considerations for transparency.

IDRC programs sometimes provide additional support to grantees for monitoring and evaluation as a way to strengthen a focus on results, adaptive management, and organizational development. IDRC programs have also invited grantees to work with them to improve evaluation tools and approaches for new sectors or results of research for development.