

## *International Development Research Centre*

were laid down by the first president, W. David Hopper; its first chairman, former Prime Minister Pearson; and the other nineteen members of the international board of governors, six of whom must be from developing countries, four from other developed countries, and the rest Canadian.

### **First President**

Hopper brought sound scientific credentials and considerable development experience when he returned to his home town to take up the task of building the IDRC. At age forty-three he had already spent the better part of a decade with the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations in India. "Hopper was conscious people in the Third World were tired of being told what to do," says Shirley Seward, an IDRC social sciences program officer who wrote a history of the Centre's early years. "He was totally committed to the idea that research should be conducted by developing country people in developing country institutions, and that a Canadian component, if any, would be minor."

The early governors decided to channel the Centre's limited funds into projects aimed at improving rural living standards because rural populations generally benefit last and least from scientific advances. Aware that even relatively inexperienced researchers may stumble across important discoveries, the Centre attempted to balance support for research training and support for the advancement of knowledge. Great emphasis was laid on strengthening Third World research capacity, especially through the new approach of teaming-up untried researchers with older, experienced scientists from the same region. "The issue really was, were we seeking to support research of international standard?" says Hopper, "And the answer was no, we were not. We were seeking to support research that would meet the sensible needs of developing countries."

Four program divisions based on sectoral rather than geographic lines were set up to administer projects: Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Sciences; Health Sciences; Social Sciences; and Information Sciences.

The IDRC's budget grew rapidly from the first million-dollar grant in 1970 to thirty-nine million dollars by 1977 when Hopper left to become Vice President for South Asia of the World Bank in Washington. Ivan Head, Trudeau's foreign policy adviser, became President just in time to witness what he calls the "devil's squeeze" of the late 1970s. Special legislative status and idealistic objectives did not render the Centre immune from the twin evils of inflation and government spending cuts. For the first time the IDRC had to settle for a much smaller increase in its annual grant than requested. Later in 1978 the government froze funding at the same level for 1979-80. As the dollar depreciated and research costs spiralled, grant recipients deluged the Ottawa head office with requests for additional funding. Many grew disheartened. Administrative concerns were beginning to intrude on the research work. Mike McGarry, former associate director of health sciences, says that since leaving the Centre he has met researchers who confided they would not deal with the IDRC again because it exercises such tight control over research budgets and requires an enormous amount of detailed information for project applications.

Another consequence of the financial predicament

was a reduction in the size of new project funding. The average grant dropped by as much as \$60,000 from the earlier average amount of \$200,000, although research costs were soaring. Some supplementary funding was obtained by dipping into Centre investments (the IDRC Act permits it to retain and invest money left unspent at the end of a fiscal year). The rest was made up through a tough package of austerity measures. Liaison offices in London, New Delhi and Washington and the East African office in Nairobi, one of five regional offices, were closed (Nairobi has since been reopened). Travel budgets were slashed and office expenditures trimmed. New hiring was frozen and the number of employees cut back from 355 in 1978 to 338 two years later, not including reductions in locally-hired staff.

The staff cutbacks came in two waves. A self-imposed hiring freeze and gradual elimination of redundant positions had just begun when the Conservatives came to power in the 1979 election. Sinclair Stevens, the new President of the Treasury Board, ordered an additional two percent staff reduction for all government departments and agencies, including the IDRC. Although the Centre is exempt from Treasury Board regulations, Head complied. "We thought that our trimming down . . . would allow us to escape from subsequent Treasury Board concerns about us," he says, "and indeed Treasury Board has no authority over us. Nevertheless, there is a reality to a political scene, and when the President of the Treasury Board says that he wants this done, whether he has authority over us or not, I felt there was no alternative but to acquiesce."

Centre administration was tightened and reorganized. The frequency of management committee meetings increased sharply, new accounting procedures were introduced and regional offices were instructed to report directly to the President's office through the director of planning and evaluation. The process of submitting large grant applications to a projects committee of senior staff members and representatives of other government departments was extended to projects valued at less than \$100,000. Previously the President had approved small projects almost automatically on the advice of the appropriate division director. "It was seen by some as a repressive measure," says Pfeifer, who chaired the committee, "but we had to prove that money was being spent wisely." The austerity measures and the tightening of the bureaucratic screws, like any harsh medicine, had unanticipated side effects. The 1979-80 IDRC report to Parliament records some of the consequences: "These cost reduction measures and results were not achieved without considerable sacrifice and strain on staff morale . . . Most staff members have seen their work load increase significantly."

### **Waiting on government**

Although every organization tends to ossify as it grows larger and older, some evidence suggests the Centre is paralyzed by arteriosclerosis. The only major new initiatives of recent years — a cooperative research program and renewable energy research — originated with the Canadian government rather than within the IDRC. The Centre's autonomy has been eroded. If the IDRC eats everything the government puts on its plate, it appears that it will become fat and lazy and a prisoner of government whims. If the Centre should become merely an instrument of Canadian foreign policy rather than an actor in its own