

IDRC at twelve

by Grant Manuge

The International Development Research Centre, Canada's most daring and altruistic effort to aid the world's poor nations, appears to have lost the creativity and independence of its early years as a result of political and bureaucratic pressures. While the IDRC was the brainchild of former Prime Minister Lester Pearson and got off to an impressive if quiet start under an agricultural economist, W. David Hopper, it has suffered hardening of the arteries and vulnerability to politics under Ivan Head, a close associate of Pearson's successor, Pierre Trudeau.

Twelve years after the act establishing the Centre passed through Parliament with rare all-party agreement, Canada's IDRC is still largely unknown in its own country. Yet, funded almost exclusively by an annual Parliamentary grant, the Centre has disbursed more than \$220 million to researchers in 100 countries to adapt and apply science and technology to Third World development problems. The bulk of IDRC funding supports individual applied research in developing countries. Instead of doing their own research, Centre employees locate eligible Third World scientists, help them apply for grants and monitor their progress. Among successful projects to date are the launching of an educational magazine on health and planning in West Africa, the breeding of milkfish in captivity for the first time in the Philippines and research into a weed which may kill water snails that spread belharzia, a parasitic disease afflicting millions of Egyptians.

During the 1970s the IDRC cultivated the image of a dedicated, flexible organization fulfilling its mandate with a minimum of bureaucratic rigidities. More important for the Canadian government, this was accomplished without embarrassing scandals involving the misuse of taxpayers' money. "With more than 1,500 projects in 12 years," says former IDRC Secretary and General Counsel Jim Pfeifer, "there have only been about 15 cases where we've closed down a project and pulled out."

Growing pains

But just as every child inevitably faces the trials of puberty, so the IDRC has its own problems as it comes of age. The Centre has become more political, bureaucratic and less sensitive to the needs of developing countries.

The IDRC was established as an uniquely autonomous public corporation in 1970 specifically to escape the bureaucratic environment of other government bodies, such as CIDA. To those who presided over its early years, recent efforts to transform the Centre into a cost-efficient

bureaucracy negate the very rationale for its existence. The Centre's creators intended it to be an improved version of the large, privately-funded Ford and Rockefeller Foundations in the United States, which had been heavily involved in the agricultural research that led to the Green Revolution's dramatic increases in food grain production in many developing countries. "That was the sort of model for everybody," says former External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp, who piloted the IDRC Act through Parliament. "Could we have a government-sponsored organization operated like a private foundation, free of interference, with a substantial sum of money and with an international group controlling its activities?"

In 1967 barely two percent of the funds for research in the world was spent in developing countries. Maurice Strong, CIDA's first President, wanted to help correct the imbalance by devoting part of Canada's foreign aid budget to the creation of a development research centre. Caught up in the enthusiasm of centennial year, Prime Minister Pearson was quickly convinced of such a centre's merits. The heads of no fewer than seventeen government departments and agencies were assigned to study the proposal. By the time the committee's recommendations arrived at the Cabinet table, Pearson had resigned, Trudeau had taken over and an election had intervened.

Like an expectant father, Strong followed the progress of the embryonic centre from the Pearson to Trudeau governments. He insisted draft legislation contain provisions to protect it from the political influence of government. Thanks to him the IDRC is not a crown corporation. It is not subject to governmental directives, nor do its activities require direct Parliamentary approval. Unlike CIDA, its allocations to developing countries are not tied to the purchase of Canadian goods and services. "The idea of the IDRC was really to break away from that pattern," says Sharp.

The Centre's mandate — "to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into problems of developing regions of the world and into the means of adapting and applying scientific, technical and other knowledge" — was deliberately kept broad and flexible. Research priorities

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