

Unlocking Research for Development: IDRC's Grant-making in Asia through the Perspectives of its Grantees (2016-23)



This report examines the impact of research for development in Asia, focusing on the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s contributions from 2016 to 2023. It demonstrates how evidence-driven, locally grounded, and policy-relevant research can drive economic growth, social inclusion, and climate resilience. Effective research funding goes beyond grants—it requires specialized tools, expertise, vision, and sustained support to translate findings into real-world impact. By prioritizing regional collaboration, engagement with non-research actors, and policy-focused research, IDRC has strengthened development efforts across Asia. This report aims to inspire greater commitment to funding high-impact, solutions-oriented research that addresses the region's most pressing challenges.



Scan to read the full report online.



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1 Why Research for Development?

Not all knowledge has the same impact—especially when it comes to driving economic growth and social inclusion in a world facing climate and environmental challenges. To create real change, knowledge must be research-based, evidence-driven, relevant to policy, and locally rooted. It should also be open, inclusive, and collaborative to maximize its reach and long-term impact. What makes a difference is not only what research says, but who contributed to formulating the questions, who was involved in figuring out answers, and whether decision-makers embrace it.

QUALITY RESEARCH

helps identify problems, propose solutions, and assess what works and why.

COLLABORATION

across sectors, disciplines, and borders leads to stronger research that tackles complex challenges no one can fully grasp alone.

WHEN RESEARCH IS DIRECTLY LINKED TO POLICY NEEDS

it helps identify problems, propose solutions, and assess what works and why.

OPEN RESEARCH

where data, methods, and results, are all shared—fosters innovation and wider participation.

LOCALLY-LED RESEARCH

ensures solutions are practical, culturally appropriate, and more likely to succeed. It also lowers costs and improves quality, while giving local voices a place in global discussions.

INCLUSIVE RESEARCH

which embraces diverse perspectives, strengthens both science and society by ensuring a broad range of voices are heard and represented.

This is the essence of what research for development aspires to be.

2 Is All Research Funding Equal?

Funding research is not the same as funding research that drives real-world impact. While many research agencies prioritize academic excellence—essential for progress and innovation—excellence alone is not enough to address urgent societal challenges or shape effective, equitable policies for all.

Asian countries have a strong tradition of funding high-quality research at the national level, supported by long-established and dynamic institutions. However, national research funders rarely have a mandate to:

- **Support regional collaboration across national borders, regardless of researchers' country affiliations.**
- **Fund research that actively engages non-research actors such as citizens, civil society, policymakers, and the private sector, irrespective of the domain.**
- **Prioritize research aimed at informing policy debates and guiding policy implementation.**

Furthermore, each country follows its own trajectory, and the level of institutionalization and capacity of research funding bodies in Asia varies widely.

International platforms and international research funding helps fill some of these gaps. However, the impact of such funding is often overlooked, as is the recognition that research for development requires specialized funding tools and expertise, a brave vision, and dedicated budget support.

This report represents a collaboration between the Global Development Network (GDN) and Canada's International Development Research Center (IDRC), and it explores the achievements and impact of research for development in Asia, through a focus on IDRC's work over the last decade.

The aim of this report is to spark interest and renew commitment to a broad coalition supporting more and better **research for development** across the Asian continent, as a critical lever for achieving development impacts at scale.

3 About IDRC

Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is one of a few national institutions operating with the mandate to support research for development on a truly global scale. It works collaboratively with a network of national and international funders to open up access to research for development funding, as a strategy to pursue more and better development.

*The **objectives of the Centre** are to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions (art. 4.1)*

***Research** includes any scientific or technical inquiry or experimentation that is instituted or carried out to discover new knowledge or new means of applying existing knowledge to find solutions to economic and social problems (art. 2)*

International Development Research Centre Act (R.S.C., 1985, c. I-19), accessible at <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/I-19/FullText.html>

IDRC works through a network of five regional offices and invests its resources through grant-making across five thematic areas. IDRC's five thematic areas are: Climate-Resilient Food Systems, Global Health, Education and Science, Democratic and Inclusive Governance, and Sustainable Inclusive Economies. The result is a matrix that funds research and research capacity strengthening projects across disciplines and countries. IDRC's operations in Asia (one of IDRC's five regions) are managed from a regional office in New Delhi, India. IDRC's physical presence across the five regions reflects a strong interest in working close to national and regional partners.

Word cloud generated from the title of IDRC projects in Asia.



4 About this Report

This report presents the findings of two studies commissioned by IDRC and co-created with the Global Development Network (GDN), an international public organization established to foster connections between local research in developing countries and development policy at both national and global levels.

The studies looked at the research funded by IDRC and its partners across two sub-regions, ASEAN and South Asia, in a total of 16 Asian countries. 413 projects implemented between March 2016 and October 2023 were included in the reference dataset. GDN conducted a text analysis of project reports (by IDRC and by the recipient organisations) for each program and project in the dataset; it ran an online survey targeting principal investigators (total number of respondents = 71); and conducted 21 in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews provided the basis for drafting the 'impact stories' included in the central part of this report. The selection of the impact stories was driven by the availability and interest of respondents, so it might reflect an implicit bias. Survey respondents reported receiving slightly larger grants and working on longer-term projects compared to the full dataset, suggesting a trend toward deeper engagement with IDRC. Some of the interviews were also selected by the staff of the Asia Regional Office of IDRC. In all cases, impact stories aim to capture researchers' own perspective on the impact of their projects, whenever possible through their own words, and by extension their views on what financial and

non-financial support makes a difference for them. The data and findings discussed in the main body of this report are sourced from the analysis of administrative documents made available by IDRC, and online survey responses. No primary data collection at the level of projects and the project stakeholders was done for these studies. The document does not aim to be an impact evaluation. Rather, it systematically brings together the critical experience of IDRC grantees to reflect on the added value of research for development.

IDRC operates by providing financial support to research teams and their partners, through grants. The 413 funded projects (or grants) in the database, clubbed together under 216 programs often including multiple but separate grants and grantees, correspond to an estimated investment of 413 million CAD, over a period of just over eight years. This is an estimated yearly average of 51.6 m CAD across the region, or over 3m CAD in research for development funding invested by IDRC per country, per year, between early 2016 till late 2023. The distribution of these funds falls under all thematic priorities of IDRC (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Countries in which IDRC projects were funded.



Figure 2: IDRC programs, funding and projects for the five thematic areas, the catalytic fund and the Think Tank Initiative.

Area	No. of Multi-Grant Programs (actual)	Amount (C\$ mn) (estimate)	% of Funding per Area (estimate)	% of Projects per Area (actual)
Catalytic Fund	7	7,500,000	2%	3%
Climate-Resilient Food Systems	50	234,250,000	57%	23%
Democratic and Inclusive Governance	54	40,250,000	10%	25%
Education and Science	33	47,000,000	11%	15%
Global Health	21	11,250,000	3%	10%
Sustainable Inclusive Economies	30	46,000,000	11%	14%
Sustainable Inclusive Economies (Think Tank Initiative 2)	21	26,750,000	6%	10%
TOTAL	216	413,000,000	100%	100%

Figure 3: Distribution of IDRC funding in Asia, by program area (based on estimated absolute numbers).

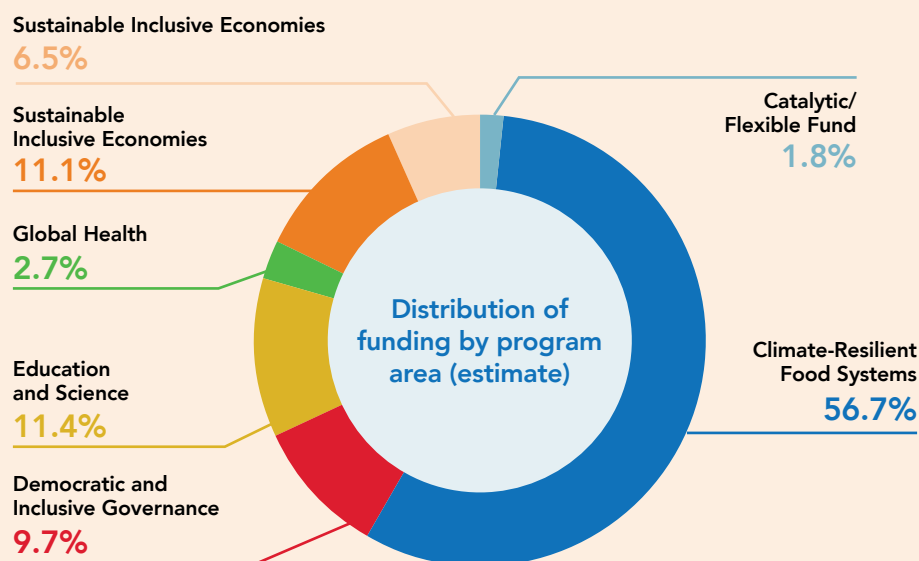
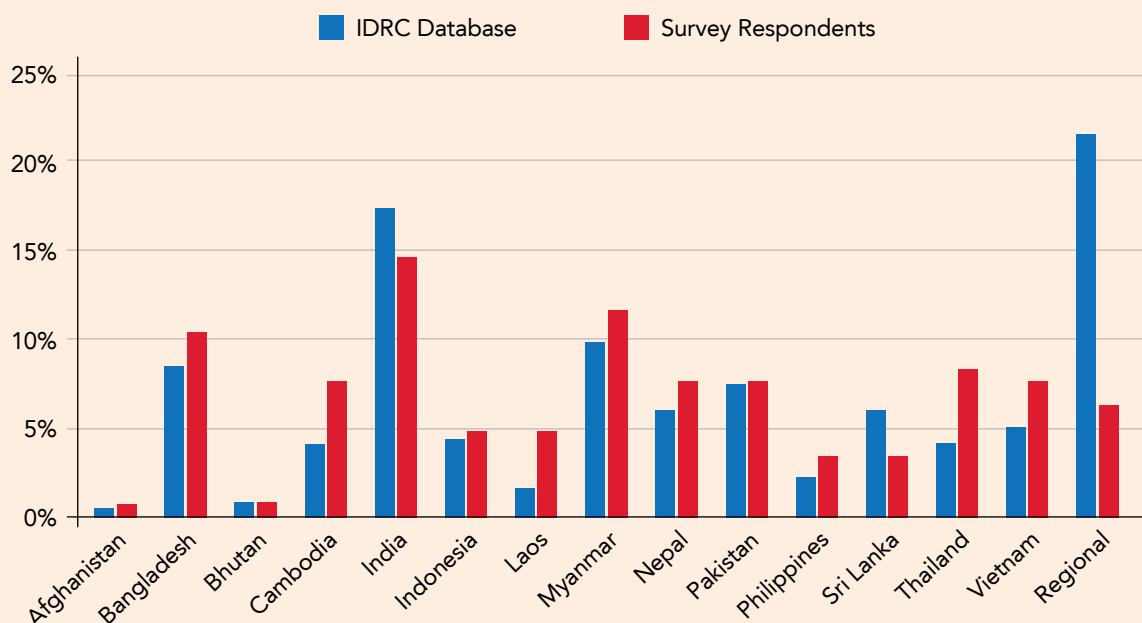


Figure 4: Distribution of IDRC projects in Asia by location of intended impact.

Distribution of IDRC projects in ASEAN by location of intended impact

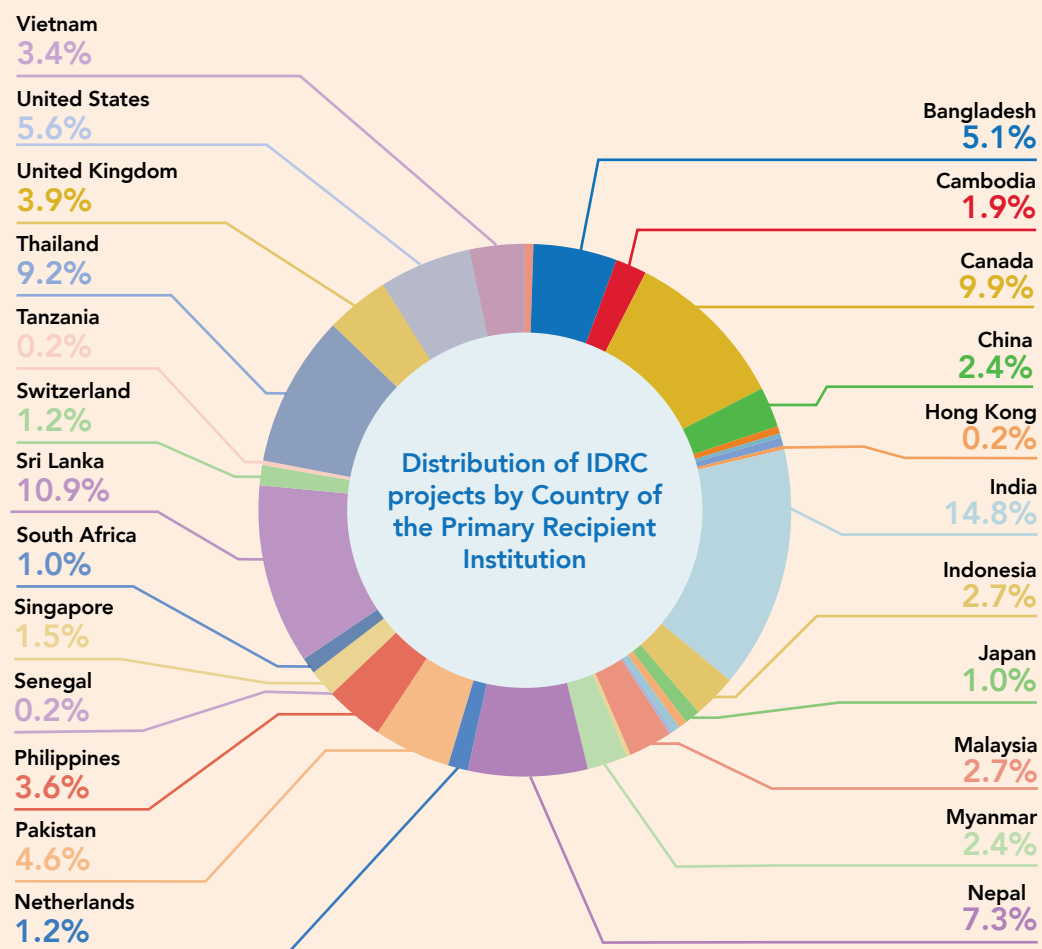


India (14.8%), Sri Lanka (10.9%), and Thailand (9.2%) stand out as major recipients across South Asia and ASEAN, but over 60% of funding is spread across all other countries in the region, with the exception of the Maldives. (see Figure 5).

Almost a quarter of the projects focus on regional collaboration (22%): they funded researchers to

work beyond national borders, either within the same project (a Sri Lankan institution looking at how technology is changing work in Myanmar and impacting women's employment opportunities – see the impact story on LIRNEAsia below) or as multiple projects under the same regional program (as in the case of researchers in multiple Asian countries working on COVID-19 impacts

Figure 5: Distribution of IDRC projects in Asia by country of primary recipient institution.



on research systems). (see Figure 4) Countries such as Myanmar, for reasons linked to the current political situation and its repercussions on the ability of international funders to fund locally, receive substantial attention from researchers based in neighbouring countries.

Research teams and institutions based outside of Asia also play a significant role. About 25% of IDRC grants in the region are directed to researchers with a primary affiliation in Canada (9.9%), United States (5.6%), and United Kingdom (3.9%), who collaborate with local research counterparts to implement their IDRC grant. (see Figure 5).

While grants vary widely in size and duration, 74% of grantees (304 out of the 413 reviewed) received less than CAD 1m, 18% (74) between CAD 1m and

2m. Large grants above CAD 2 million are rare, representing just 8.5% of projects. Around 96% of the grants last less than five years, and a significant majority (58%) last between two and five years. (see Figure 6).

Survey responses highlight a strong emphasis on strengthening research capacities, with over 70% of respondents indicating that their projects focused primarily on capacity building (59%) or both research and capacity building (11%). A third of respondents stated that their grant was mainly for their own research. Notably, IDRC, like other *research for development* donors, leverages a "learning by doing" approach to capacity strengthening. Only a small percentage of grants fund dedicated training programs, while the vast majority support locally-led research projects. (see Figure 8).

Figure 6: Distribution of different grant sizes (data from IDRC database and survey).

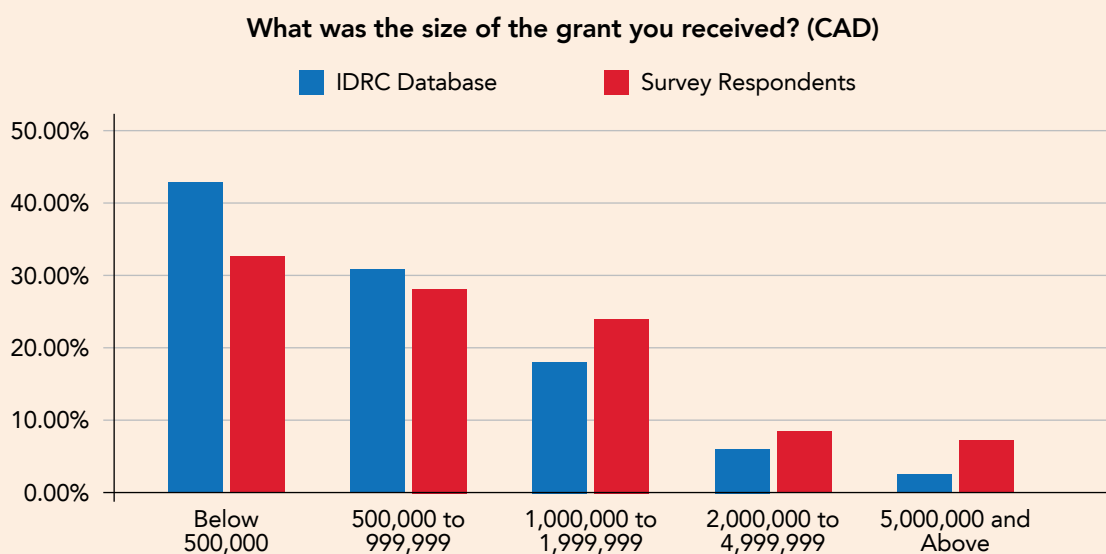


Figure 7: Variation in length of projects (data from IDRC database and survey).

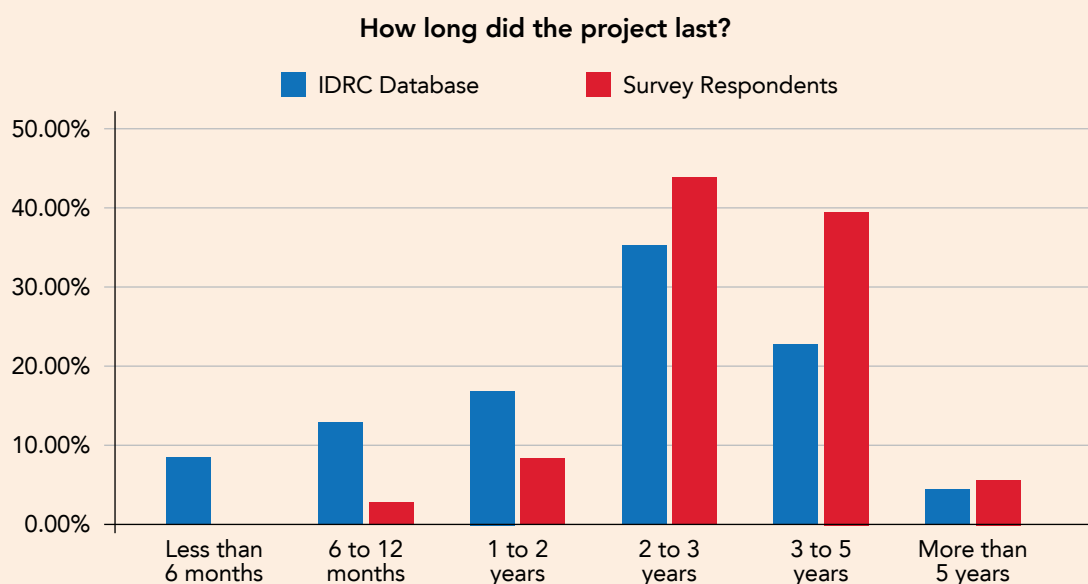
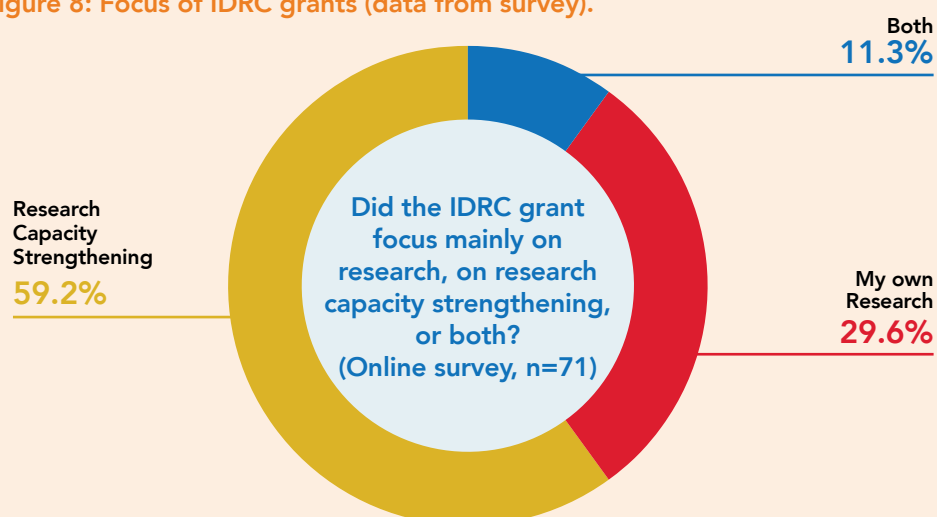


Figure 8: Focus of IDRC grants (data from survey).



5 The Impact of Research for Development in Asia – In the Words of IDRC Grantees

We present 12 impact stories that show, through IDRC's own grant-making work, the impact of *research for development* on people and policies across the continent.



THINK TANK INITIATIVE



TITLE

TTI Phase 2 Institutional Support: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies



TIMELINE

2014–2019



FUNDING

Multi-year core funding



PARTNERS

Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)



LOCATION

India

Challenge

Plurality of voices and access to public debate is a structural feature of democracy. Policy actors in developing countries are becoming more open to using research evidence for policymaking and placing a higher value on research data and analysis. However, local funding for local research institutions remains limited in the regions where the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) operates.

The TTI is a multi-donor program dedicated to strengthening independent policy research institutions—also known as "think tanks"—in developing countries, enabling them to provide high-quality research that informs and influences policy. Following an initial phase (2008-2014), TTI Phase 2 (2014-2019) funded 43 institutions to help consolidate their role as credible development actors both within their countries and, in some cases, regionally and internationally.

Solution

The CSDS has been an independent and critical voice in India's public sphere for decades, as well as a hub for high-quality social science research. It regularly receives project grants, which are typically tied to specific activities. The TTI grant was directed toward developing capacity, optimizing governance, and making infrastructural interventions level. It covered approximately one third of CSDS's annual budget, received over eight years (CSDS was also part of the first phase of the program). The grant enabled CSDS to expand its capacity and activities across various research themes, foster more direct engagement with policymakers, implement a capacity-building program, and enhance its infrastructure.

Impact and Results

Among the many research activities funded through the grant, two programs stand out: the Indian

Languages Program and the Capacity Building Program. In India, the majority of social science research is conducted in English, but there is significant demand for research published in other languages. To address this, CSDS began publishing *Pratiman*, the only refereed social science journal in India that publishes in Hindi. This grant also enabled CSDS to establish a regular training program for young scholars in India, with 25-35 participants per year, called *Researching the Contemporary*. Alongside this, the grant established a visiting fellowship program, offering 10-12 fellowships annually. The grant also impacted research infrastructure, funding improvements to the library which included installation of solar panels and the addition of barrier-free ramps to improve access. Most of the activities initiated under the grant continued even after TTI funding finished, including the Indian Languages Program and the *Researching the Contemporary* training program.

Future Prospects

The current government's priority in funding is now given to universities—which serve a very large number of students—over research centres. Nonetheless, CSDS continues its activities; *Pratiman* has become a reference for several regional universities, and the training program receives large numbers of applications.

Role of IDRC Funding

The IDRC funding was very easy to manage and user-friendly, with regular monitoring of activities and field visits from the program officer, which helped CSDS to administer the grant. There was a great deal of flexibility in directing the funds where they were most needed. The reporting system was also simpler compared to other funders, allowing CSDS to focus more on how to use the funds rather than on the administrative tasks.

DIGITAL POLICY



TITLE

Turning Evidence into Digital Policy in Myanmar



TIMELINE

2018–2020



FUNDING

CAD 262,601



PARTNERS

LIRNEasia



LOCATION

Myanmar,
Sri Lanka,
India

Challenge

When Myanmar opened up its economy in 2013, a key question was how its people could benefit from digital technology now that the economy was finally open. Additionally, how could knowledge and research contribute to this journey? There was a need to understand and improve the overall internet ecosystem and infrastructure in the country, and to lay the foundations for a digitally inclusive future. Two projects focussed on determining basic facts, such as the level of connectivity in the country and establishing efforts toward digital inclusion, capacity building, and influencing policy. After five years of engagement, the challenges were then to disseminate insights for future work, continue capacity-building and transform digital governance in the broader South Asia region toward greater inclusivity and accountability.

Solution

This research project offers both quantitative and qualitative insights into the progress made and the challenges that remain in the ICT sector since market liberalization in Myanmar. Additionally, this grant allowed LIRNEasia to contribute to drafting a new broadcasting policy in Sri Lanka. It trained civil society members, parliamentarians, and journalists in areas such as economics, telecommunications, regulation, e-government, and citizen engagement. A key focus with media and civil society was to identify those who could use data and research and apply evidence to influence policy.

Impact and Results

There were a number of research outputs. For example a study on labor automation in India that documented how technology is changing work, a literature review on female labour participation and changes in women's employment opportunities, and a reflection on Myanmar's ICT sector, covering the economic, social, and political aspects.

Using quantifiable research insights LIRNEasia was able to directly influence policy in Myanmar. One example is the country's Universal Service Fund

(USF) strategy, where LIRNEasia's research led to the inclusion of broadband as a service that needs to be universally accessible and the recognition of people with disabilities as a group requiring funding for digital inclusion through the USF. It also contributed to the discussion around the new telecoms law and efforts to overturn problematic laws related to slander and misinformation. The project provided input to Sri Lanka's Broadcasting Regulatory Commission Bill and National Digital Policy, outlining the vision and roadmap for achieving Sri Lanka's national digital transformation goals. A series of monographs has documented Myanmar's journey toward digital inclusion but many of the reforms catalyzed by this and other research were put on hold when the military regained control of the country.

Future Prospects

LIRNEasia played a key role in nurturing the Myanmar ICT Development Organization (MIDO) which went on to become the most prominent digital activist group in Myanmar, and, worked through them on much of its research and activities to influence policy. LIRNEasia also helped formalize the MIDO through improvements in accounting, financial planning, strategic planning, and fundraising. Unfortunately, the military takeover of the country forced many of MIDO's team members to leave but LIRNEasia remains committed to working with MIDO on issues related to digital rights in Myanmar.

Role of IDRC Funding

Since 2006, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been LIRNEasia's largest and most consistent funder. The funding has evolved in response to the changing digital landscape in the region, from quantifying levels of access and marginalization in relation to digital technology to exploring the gig economy in this sector, and more artificial intelligence (AI). IDRC has played a key role in supporting the development of a regional research agenda. It supported the complex financial arrangements required to ensure that field staff could be paid and that work could be completed. The project officers at IDRC brought significant on-the-ground expertise and capacity.

RESILIENT MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES



TITLE

Building Resilient Mountain Communities: Earthquake Reconstruction in Dhungentar, Nepal



TIMELINE

2016–2019



FUNDING

CAD
1,228,200



PARTNERS

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)



LOCATION

Nepal

Challenge

On April 25, 2015, a powerful 7.8 Richter magnitude earthquake hit central Nepal, causing over 8,700 deaths and more than 22,000 injuries. Hundreds of thousands of homes were flattened, some 15,000 government buildings and 288,797 residential buildings were destroyed, and some 8,000 schools and 1,000 health facilities were damaged. Over half of Nepal's districts were affected by this event.

Solution

This project was implemented by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) to rebuild damaged infrastructure and services, support the livelihoods of the most vulnerable households and build the disaster management capacity of the communities in Dhungentar, Nepal.

In collaboration with local NGO Sahayata Samajik Sanstha (SSS) the project was implemented in three phases. The short-term phase supported priority areas to address basic human needs and begin reconstruction. The medium-term phase focused on completing the reconstruction and recovery efforts and the final phase involved strengthening the capacity of communities and institutions to manage natural hazards.

Impact and Results

By utilizing innovative tools and technologies and employing a participatory approach, the project built a disaster resilient infrastructure. ICIMOD forged a strategic partnership with the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA) to integrate green solutions, such as the adoption of interlocking compressed stabilized soil blocks (CSSBs) technology for housing and public infrastructure. The use of CSSBs was cost-effective and utilised local labour and material, harnessing indigenous knowledge and practices to ensure sustained development. The technology was used to rebuild

an entire village comprising about 100 houses, resulting in 35% less carbon emissions than conventional burnt bricks.

ICIMOD blended the reconstruction activities with a strategy for livelihood recovery. The project created employment-intensive reconstruction work, developed the skills of the villagers, promoted enterprise development and micro-finance, increased agricultural productivity and facilitated access to markets. At least 8 community skill training programs were conducted: CSSB blocks production, social mobilization, kitchen gardening, liquid soap making, laundry soap making, incense stick making, crystal jewellery making, poultry farming, and animal husbandry. The project set up an agricultural model, and improved 2 blacksmith work sheds and 2 watermills.

The project formed community groups, such as Reconstruction and Development Community, Mothers' Group of Dhungentar, and Children's Group of Dhungentar to entrust greater decision-making responsibility to the community.

Future Prospects

The MoU between ICIMOD and NRA provided national recognition and helped bring together public and private stakeholders. Consequently, ICIMOD collaborated with a local NGO Sahayata Samajik Sanstha (SSS) and several private sector entities, which brought resources as well as development initiatives like multipurpose cooperatives, social enterprises, smart agriculture and vocational training.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding was flexible and supportive, allowing ICIMOD to adapt during project challenges. Additionally, IDRC's approach promoted a collaborative, problem-solving environment, enabling a responsive and impactful project.

GENDER AND VIOLENCE



TITLE

Gender and Violence in Urban Pakistan



TIMELINE

2013–2016



FUNDING

CAD 545,886



PARTNERS

Institute of Business Administration,
Karachi



LOCATION

Pakistan

Challenge

The link between marginalized urban lives and violence is well established and has been the focus of several studies both globally and in Pakistan. Young adult men are the most visible and well-studied agents and victims of violence in urban areas. Conversely, young adult women are often invisible and under-studied. The challenge lies in investigating the gender role drivers that contribute to violence among marginalized urban youth, while also considering the infrastructural dimensions of these socially constructed identities. A related challenge is building the capacity of researchers to establish evidence on this complex and nuanced area of research that challenges stereotypical representations.

Solution

The research project explored how different gender expectations drive various forms of violence. It focussed on four urban working-class neighborhoods of Karachi and Rawalpindi/Islamabad. In partnership with local communities a group of young researchers collected data on how frustrated gendered expectations may contribute to violence and how addressing these can be achieved by improving access to public services and opportunities, alongside influencing public education and media. The two Principal Investigators (Pis) established a mentoring program that included individual and group training sessions, along with meetings during field observation periods.

Impact and Results

The project's findings are based on a multi-matrix methodology, which included approximately 2,400 questionnaire surveys, nearly 60 ethnographic-style interviews, participant observations, participatory photographic surveys, media monitoring, a secondary literature review, and key informant interviews. The findings overwhelmingly point to access to services and household vulnerability profiles as major drivers of violence, particularly as they intersect with discourses surrounding

masculinities, femininities, and sexualities. These findings were published in academic journals, policy briefs, and media interventions, with visual data shared through photographic exhibitions.

The most significant impact of the project was from the mentoring and capacity building of young researchers who were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and often from underprivileged communities. Three of them went on to pursue PhDs.

Disappointingly there was little translation of data into policy change. The project engaged with local policymakers, and some participated in activities, but there was no direct policy changes from the project. There was extensive engagement with the media, creating spaces to foster a deeper understanding of urban violence.

Future Prospects

Publications originating from the project continue to attract attention, with several studies being cited. During the project, a positive relationship was established with IDRC and the the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) in Karachi. IBA participated in a subsequent call on cities and governance, resulting in a second IDRC-funded project titled "Governance, Land, and the Gendered Politics of Displacement in Pakistan" which exclusively involved local partners.

Role of IDRC Funding

One of the merits of the IDRC is its straightforward application process and clear expectations and management demands. Internal progress reports are not a burden but an opportunity to reflect on the actual work and the substantive dynamics explored by the project. IDRC has provided funding promptly and without complications, and the presence of a dedicated South Asia office has also been invaluable, as the officers there have a deep understanding of the local context. IDRC funding recognizes the importance of mentoring and capacity building, which are embedded throughout the research program.

PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE



TITLE

Preventing Early Marriage
in Urban Poor Settlements
in Bangladesh



TIMELINE

2015–2020



FUNDING

CAD 500,000



PARTNERS

The BRAC University,
Dhaka



LOCATION

Bangladesh

Challenge

Child marriage among girls is most prevalent in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with Bangladesh having the highest rate of marriages involving girls under the age of 15. In Bangladesh, 64% of girls are married before the age of 18, with the median age for a first marriage being 16.4 years. Uneducated adolescent girls are at a higher risk of marrying five years earlier than those with secondary or higher education. Additionally, 81% of girls from households with the lowest income marry before age 18, compared to 56% from households with the highest income. This issue is even more pronounced in urban slums, areas marked by widespread violence, extreme poverty, and a lack of basic services. These conditions suggest a strong link between development, governance, accountability failures, and the persistence of early child marriage.

Solution

This project conducted one of the few research studies on urban slum settlements, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the causes and consequences of early marriage and to explore the social construction of gender. This included 145 qualitative interviews, and surveys with 1129 married and 1006 unmarried adolescent girls in two of the largest slum settlements in the country - Dhaka and Chittagong. The project aimed to build trusting relationships with local communities and recognize the insecurity and structural violence they face, highlighting that early marriage in urban slums does not occur in isolation and must be addressed through multiple structural drivers. The research engaged a range of local stakeholders, followed by outreach to the government, journalists, and lawyers to raise awareness of this phenomenon.

Impact and Results

The project produced academic publications, alongside publications for the general public, including an illustrated book featuring stories of girls from slums. The book launch was attended

by local policymakers. The goal of the book was to humanize people living in slums by amplifying their voices, struggles, and strategies, while avoiding the reproduction of biases and negative judgments. The project included media engagement, community involvement with local stakeholders, and collaboration with policymakers. IDRC was supportive of these participatory efforts, allowing the project methodology, timelines, and the selection of research participants to adapt to the evolving conditions on the ground. Local stakeholders and the community were actively involved, validating findings, and utilizing the evidence to improve programs and plans.

Future Prospects

BRAC University successfully applied for IDRC funding for two additional projects which focused on innovative digital health solutions addressing the COVID-19 crisis among refugees and vulnerable populations, including Rohingya refugees. However, the government never granted the necessary permits to start the projects and the funding was withdrawn after two years. The ability of younger colleagues at the institution to participate in competitive international funding calls highlights the effectiveness of the research capacity building that IDRC has supported.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC stands out for its exceptional support of social science research, even during high-risk periods. It prioritizes local-level research, design, and methods, empowering research leadership in the Global South. IDRC fosters equal partnerships, including partners in the budget, research design, and publication outputs. Additionally, IDRC funding has a significant capacity-building impact on the institutions it supports by notifying them of new calls for proposals, maintaining regular communication, and demonstrating commitment to creating sustainable partnerships and networks. IDRC does not act as a benevolent charity but instead offers support, leaving decision-making to partners and allowing time to build trusting relationships.

HEAT STRESS



TITLE

Climate Adaptive Action Plans
to Manage Heat Stress in
Indian cities



TIMELINE

2017–2020



FUNDING

CAD
1,001,800



PARTNERS

Integrated Research
and Action for
Development (IRADe)



LOCATION

India

Challenge

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that rising global temperatures will increase the frequency and severity of heat waves. In India, these heat waves are exacerbated by the urban heat island effect, which significantly impacts the health of vulnerable communities. According to the Indian Meteorological Department, more than 2,400 people died from heat-related causes in 2015 alone and this number is rising. However, public recognition of the magnitude of these hazards in India remains low.

Solution

The project addressed these challenges by improving the management of heat stress risks in India through the development of spatially differentiated and gender-sensitive Heat Stress Action Plans (HSAPs) in Delhi, Bhubaneswar, and Rajkot. A key component of the project was generating data-driven evidence of rising heat in these cities to influence policy and planning. The project also aimed to understand how heat is impacting the most vulnerable, including low-income groups, children, and the elderly. With this evidence and analysis of the impacts, the project developed a plan to assist city planners and policymakers in coping with heat waves. Finally, the project focused on building the capacity of key stakeholders, particularly policymakers, administrators, medical officers, and groups essential for the development and implementation of the plan.

Impact and Results

The project measured the loss of workdays and productivity due to heat stress. For example, Delhi recorded the highest wage loss at 36% and highest average monthly wage loss at INR 600. Productivity loss could range from 1 to 15 days, depending on the intensity of heat stress. The project provided water and buttermilk at more than 300 locations and, alongside this, it distributed 15,784 heat advisory pamphlets in local languages.

The project achieved three scientifically sound Heat Stress Action Plans (HSAPs) which were developed and implemented by the municipal corporations/councils in the three cities. The project mapped urban heat islands to provide a detailed understanding of the impact of heat waves, particularly on vulnerable groups. This granular approach added an inclusive dimension by developing gender-sensitive heat action plans. Widespread early warning systems and awareness campaigns were established to issue heat stress alerts and, based on the insights from this study, there was a revision of the threshold for activating these alerts. City authorities adopted and implemented the HSAPs, despite delays caused by COVID-19 in the last year of the project. The project gained significant attention at international (New York Times, The Guardian) and national levels.

Future Prospects

Negotiations with the Delhi government continued well after the project's conclusion to ensure the adoption of the HSAPs. Urban policies are being revised annually and disseminated by local authorities, with guidelines developed by the project being adopted by the Orissa State Disaster Management Authority. The project was designed to be replicable in other cities and this includes a gender-adaptive framework, which was implemented in three additional cities: Surat in India, Rajshahi in Bangladesh, and Colombo in Sri Lanka. Another notable outcome of the project is the creation of a permanent network supported by WHO and WMO—the South Asia Heat Health Information Network (SAHHIN) - to which more than 20 thousand people signed up.

Role of IDRC Funding

This project was the first in which IRADe received funding from IDRC. The funding was practical, flexible, and adaptive to new circumstances, focused on supporting innovation, research, and making an impact on people's lives. Particularly during COVID-19 pandemic, IDRC granted extra time to complete the planned actions.

CHANGING KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS



TITLE

Finding Levers of Change in Myanmar's Fragmented Knowledge System



TIMELINE

2019–2021



FUNDING

CAD 188,700



PARTNERS

Global Development Network (GDN), Centre for the Economic and Social Development (CESD)



LOCATION

Myanmar

Challenge

Myanmar's universities conduct almost no research, and this is unique to the region. Instead, the majority of evidence is generated by private research groups or non-profit organizations, primarily funded by international donors (until the 2021 coup). This has created a vicious cycle where the low demand for quality data and analysis results in an almost nonexistent supply of evidence to inform development policy which in turn further diminishes the role of universities in generating this evidence. This is impacting all sectors, from trade and labor to health and education.

Solution

GDN, in close collaboration with the Yangon-based local think tank CESD, has conducted a study to understand the systemic barriers and opportunities that keep research out of the national university system, and excluded from policy discussions. The study was done using the 'Doing Research Assessment' tool, an approach used by GDN across the global South. GDN and CESD involved an advisory group of key people from universities and the ministry to oversee the project.

Impact and Results

2017 data show that only 0.37% of Myanmar's investment in research and development goes

to development research in the social sciences, which is a miniscule amount. Less than 10% of the researcher population work in economics, sociology, demography, and related disciplines. Bureaucratic pressures discourage active research careers in universities, and the relationship between policy makers and researchers is plagued by a deep mistrust. The study identified three key levers of change to address these deep-set problems: reforming career advancement and access to funding, promoting collaboration between sub-national parliaments and sub-national universities, and drafting a national research policy to guide the sector.

Future Prospects

Before the coup, the research team was invited to draft the research priorities for the National Education Strategic Plan by the Ministry of Higher Education. The Rectors' Committee then developed a plan to establish a national research foundation with a key role for research funding and policy.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC provided flexible funding, enabling a virtuous collaboration between national and international agencies who were deeply committed to supporting evidence-based policy.

TECHNOLOGY FOR INCLUSION



TITLE

Improving Maternal and Child Health for Ethnic Minority Women in Vietnam using Digital Health



TIMELINE

2012-2016, with follow-up since 2022



FUNDING

CAD 406,000 (initial)
CAD 700,000 (follow-up)



PARTNERS

Institute of Population, Health and Development, Simon Fraser University, University of Melbourne, and health authorities in Vietnam



LOCATION

Vietnam

Challenge

There have been significant improvements in maternal, newborn and children's health outcomes in Vietnam. Between 1990 and 2020, infant mortality fell from 37 to 17 deaths per 1000 live births and under-five mortality dropped from 52 to 21. Maternal mortality decreased from 139 to 124 during these years, but within this group there were significant health inequalities - the maternal mortality ratio amongst ethnic minority groups was four times higher than amongst majority Kinh ethnic group. The main reason for this is because ethnic minority communities tend to live in remote, rural areas where access to health services is limited.

Solution

The Institute of Population, Health and Development in Vietnam piloted a low-cost mobile health intervention targeting women from ethnic minorities who often walk as far as 20 km in mountain areas to visit government health centres. The system used SMS to reach women over their mobile phones, providing information and guidance before, during and after their pregnancy. Each woman received up to 75 one-way messages. Healthcare staff in provincial and district clinics were offered a small incentive (around USD 5 /month) to support the pilot.

Impact and Results

The project has increased health awareness and proactive behavior among women. Many health

workers reported that women phoned them more frequently to seek information about their own health and the health of family members. The project also shifted family dynamics around health: many women shared and discussed the messages with their husbands, which is uncommon in a society where maternal and infant health have traditionally been considered women's domain. There was a high level of engagement with the project, including the women who participated, their families, and the healthcare workers involved. This was evidenced by the fact that the drop-out rate among the women who participated was zero, and that healthcare workers gave up monetary incentives to continue the program past its first phase.

Future Prospects

The impact of the project raised the interest of Vietnam's Ministry of Health, which led to a joint scale-up project in 2022 to upgrade from using SMS texts to a smartphone-based app, which is currently being rolled out in four provinces.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding made a significant difference in enabling pilot testing with flexible funding, supporting evidence generation for national scaling, and allowing collaboration with the Ministry of Health to sustain and expand the program.

JOBS AT THE BORDERS



TITLE

Jobs at the Borders:
Promoting Gender
Equality and Growth
in ASEAN's Economic
Zones



TIMELINE

2016–2019



FUNDING

CAD 382,600



PARTNERS

Asian Institute of
Technology (AIT), Mekong
Migration Network



LOCATION

Cambodia,
Myanmar,
Thailand

Challenge

Rapid growth of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in ASEAN has raised concerns about the rights and protections of migrant workers, especially women, in these zones. Women represent the majority of the sector's workforce and they are often concentrated in the lowest-paying positions with the least recognized skills. This is especially true within the growing number of garment industries that are establishing themselves in these zones, bringing issues around gender and women's economic rights to the forefront. This raises a critical question: can an SEZ-driven growth model co-exist with, and even promote, gender equality in the region?

Solution

The project explored how the employment of migrant women in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) can enhance economic outcomes for women in ASEAN's rapidly changing garment industry. The project involved analyzing SEZs as frameworks that foster labor exploitation and remove worker protections, particularly for women. Its insights highlighted the need for childcare services, better skill recognition, and consistent working conditions in SEZs across ASEAN. The findings were shared via policy briefs, workshops, and media, increasing visibility on issues of migrant labor and gender equality.

Impact and Results

The project highlighted the sacrifices that migrant workers make in their working conditions and caregiving responsibilities—such as childcare and elderly care—as a result of contributing to the

economy. The project engaged SEZ management and government officials on policy changes and it advocated for childcare services in SEZs. The project also influenced the migrant registration process and raised awareness of gender-specific needs in labor zones. Additionally, researchers from the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) defended three academic theses on SEZs. The project maintained a public presence through media coverage and photo exhibitions. Its findings and policy briefs were disseminated via YouTube videos, with similar outreach efforts conducted by other NGOs.

Future Prospects

The SEZ manager from Myanmar expressed interest in the project's findings and participated in multiple meetings, showing a willingness to support the implementation of recommendations, particularly regarding childcare facilities. Unfortunately, following the coup, no concrete developments occurred in this area. AIT continues to address migrant labor issues in ongoing workshops and seminars. AIT has established a Master's program in Gender and Leadership alongside a platform called the Gender Lab, which educates students and supports migrant women and gender equality initiatives across ASEAN.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding was flexible and supportive, allowing AIT to adapt during project challenges. Additionally, IDRC's approach promoted a collaborative, problem-solving environment, enabling a responsive and impactful project.

CLIMATE SMART VILLAGES



TITLE

Climate Smart Villages
– Resilience Building,
Women Empowerment,
Equity and Sustainable
Food Systems



TIMELINE

June 2020 to
November
2022



FUNDING

CAD 900,000



PARTNERS

International Institute of
Rural Reconstruction (IIRR)



LOCATION

Philippines,
Cambodia,
Myanmar

Challenge

There is an urgent need to make food systems more resilient to climate fluctuations. Millions of small-scale farmers in Asia, already under the burden of food and nutritional insecurity, are experiencing the compounded impacts from climate change. The climate smart agriculture movement promises to adequately tackle this, but there is still a lack of information about costs and benefits from specific cases.

Solution

Responding to these challenges requires transformational change that embraces the development of more inclusive, resilient and sustainable food systems with special attention to small and marginalized farmers, while helping to reduce gender inequalities in employment in agriculture. The project generated evidence on how to build resilience and climate change adaptation through sustainable outcomes in the areas of household resilience building, economic empowerment of women, and also local food production systems.

Impact and Results

The project demonstrates that tangible results in climate change adaptation can be generated within three to five years already. The research team identified practices, technologies, and innovations within the food system through a portfolio of socially inclusive options. These include promoting stress-

tolerant varieties of primary crops; new platforms for agriculture production, such as integrating and improving small livestock production, and vegetable production in patches of land around households; reducing the footprint of fertilizer use; integrating trees into existing farming systems to generate new sources of income; and creating microclimates around the farm to protect them from storms. The project developed a methodology for measuring household resilience based on several indicators.

Future Prospects

The International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) continues to work on local community-based platforms in the Philippines by building on this rich evidence base. It has entered into a new partnership (2022 to 2025) with ClimBeR, a CGIAR initiative on building systemic resilience against climate variability and extremes. IDRC's partnership with AQUADAPT (2023–2027) continues, which addresses the intertwined critical challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and food insecurity through research.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding allowed IIRR to shift its focus to measuring impact and establishing evidence and knowledge, and to expand the work to Myanmar and Cambodia. A close communication with the program officer, before, during and after the project ensured guidance, responsiveness and flexibility, and this was maintained throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

PARLIAMENT IMPACT



TITLE

JBuilding Parliamentary Research Capacity in Shan State, Myanmar



TIMELINE

2017–2019



FUNDING

CAD 383,475



PARTNERS

Parliamentary Centre (PC),
Enlightened Myanmar
Research Foundation
(EMReF)



LOCATION

Shan State,
Myanmar

Challenge

Under the Myanmar 2008 constitution, 14 state and regional governments were created with the responsibility to debate and pass local legislation as well as to approve local budgets and oversee their spending. However, the capacity of sub-national parliaments to exercise their roles was extremely low. Research suffered immensely during the years of military dictatorship and held a limited role in decision-making. There was a need to rebuild an evidence-based system for the foundation of a more inclusive and open democratic society.

Solution

The aim of the project was to strengthen parliamentary research capacity in Shan State, Myanmar. This was done through training sessions on gender-sensitive research and information access, alongside building resources, which included establishing library systems for research and legislative records, the creation of tools like the “Parliamentary Research Training Manual” and a follow-up mentoring process that involved about 50 people, MPs and members of staff.

Impact and Results

The project established a sustainable research support framework, creating tools and resources that are still used across Myanmar's regional parliaments. For example, the MPs developed a manual for library management procedures and built an actual library with a collection of periodicals, digital resources and records of their own debates

and proceedings. This was financed with their own budget, their own staff, and support from the Union Parliament. The project also empowered female MPs like Daw Htar Yee to conduct independent research, which enhanced the quality of legislative debate.

Future Prospects

Despite setbacks due to the 2021 coup, the project has laid the groundwork for future democratic resilience and evidence-based governance. There have been a couple of additional small projects that the Centre implemented on its own and with IDRC resources under the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar initiative (K4DM). The project coordinator facilitated some direct exchanges between those in Myanmar who were elected but could not take seats and members of the Canadian Parliament, and continued working with the Myanmar diaspora in Canada, Thailand, and through digital channels. The focus, which has been mirrored by other funders, has been on providing direct support to those who are trying to change the situation in Myanmar and bring the country back to a path towards inclusive and federal democracy.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC's flexible funding enabled adaptive, impactful work connecting local research capacity with legislative needs. Its catalytic support fostered long-term, sustainable partnerships and follow-up projects, sustaining democratic governance efforts post-coup.

THINK CLIMATE INDONESIA



TITLE

Think Climate
Indonesia



TIMELINE

Jan 2019 to
Dec 2023



FUNDING

CAD 1,5 million
IDRC, CAD 1,5
million Oak
Foundation



PARTNERS

World Resource Institute
(WRI), Indonesia; Koka
Kita; Kemitraan; Kelaka;
PATTIRO



LOCATION

Indonesia

Challenge

Indonesia is one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters in the world. The country's rapid economic growth has led to tremendous environmental changes, including pollution and contamination of inland and coastal waters, deforestation, overexploitation of resources, and loss of biodiversity. This is adversely affecting the quality of life and climate change adaptation capacity of the country's poorest, most vulnerable people.

Solution

The Think Climate Indonesia (TCI) initiative responded to these challenges by supporting Indonesia to meet climate-mitigation commitments and engage in climate-adaptation actions by supporting independent policy research organizations to undertake high-quality research, communicate evidence, and engage policy audiences and communities on climate change. The initiative supported five Indonesian think tanks, which were selected through an open competitive call. The World Resource Institute's (WRI) work had a particular focus on how local communities use their forests.

Impact and Results

Research projects under the TCI initiative collected data and observations on the impact of climate change directly from the communities. Establishment and assessment of community empowerment takes time: however there were observations of changes in the behavior of local

people, such as increased awareness in protecting forests and in utilizing resources more sustainably. Dissemination of results has been a central activity, with over 500 presentations and outputs. For example, several policy dialogues were organized, the final one in October 2023 on "The Strategic Role of Civil Society Organizations and Youth in Promoting Climate Change Action in Indonesia National Elections 2024." Memorandums of Understanding have been signed with several Ministries and several studies have been published. Youth camps were established to raise a new generation of activists,

Future Prospects

The work with local communities continues, for example through the AQUADAPT partnership (2023–2027), which is also funded by IDRC. Project partner WRI has been working for the last couple of years with local communities of shrimp farmers, trying to find ways to prevent mangrove degradation while fostering the shrimp aquaculture.

Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding was flexible, but it was directed towards strengthening the organization capacity by creating a small unit on gender. The funding allowed WRI to deliver work on sustainability and low carbon development, and helped build new concepts or test established ones in some pilot sites. This kind of research-focused project is very relevant to the WRI mission and it enables WRI to influence policy-making processes through scientific-based proposals.

6

Summing Up – Under what Circumstances does Research Funding Deliver Development Impacts?

The 12 impact stories in this report illustrate the essential and significant contributions that researchers make to advancing development through their work with and for partners in civil society, the private sector, and government. In this concluding section, we do not attempt to synthesize these impacts—each project's influence deserves to be appreciated on its own terms and within the context in which its original ideas took shape. Instead, we highlight how this exercise has also demonstrated that funding research for development yields greater returns under specific conditions. The factors outlined below may guide IDRC and (or rather, with) other national and international donors in allocating resources for maximum impact.

Funding remains tied to time-bound projects, a widely accepted reality, especially in the case of international funding. IDRC's experience with the *Think Tank Initiative*—a decade-long, multi-donor program that provided think tanks with core funding for their development—and IDRC's own core funding support window predating this initiative (see impact story on SANDEE – South Asia report), demonstrates a powerful alternative to project-based funding alone. Core funding enabled institutions to work in local languages (see the impact story on CSDS, India), prioritize their own research agendas (see the impact story on LIRNEasia, Sri Lanka), and make these the backbone of their long-term development strategies. It also allowed them to balance high-quality research with efforts to train the next generation of *research for development* professionals, including researchers (see the impact story on SPDPI, Pakistan), communicators, administrators, and technical staff. In other words, core funding embraces the idea that there is much more to impactful research than research alone, and that capacity strengthening is

built into investments in research infrastructure. The negative repercussions of the *Think Tank Initiative's* closure underscore the critical role core funding plays and the risks associated with its absence.

"This project was one of SDPI's flagship capacity-building projects. It is important to note that the project cannot be seen as just a project; it has been a long-term programme for us. The programme was instrumental in raising the SDPI's profile in the capacity-building area. Previously, SDPI had a niche in research and advocacy. This programme further enhanced the SDPI's reputation as a national institution with the capacity to undertake capacity-building initiatives."

Dr. Irfan Chatha

Head of the Centre for Learning and Development (CLD) at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan

"[If IDRC funding in the South Asia region were to decrease significantly...] regional and institutional asymmetries, among others, in the production and circulation of knowledge are likely to deepen and there will be less space and opportunities to develop local research agendas linked to collective benefit."

Laura Rovelli

CLACSO, Co-lead with India's Centre for Policy Research, of an IDRC-funded study on 'Research quality and allocation of research funds in the Global South'

Yet, project-based funding also generates impact, particularly when consecutive grants of varying size and scope support the development of specific ideas. The self-assessment of impact by the 71 respondents to GDN's survey revealed a clear correlation between the number of repeated grants and the impact of IDRC-funded work. This is no coincidence—successive grants enabled research teams to progress from evidence generation to application and, ultimately, to real-time evaluation. This sustained—and at times scalar—support helped strengthen external demand for their work, including among local communities and government agencies at all levels, throughout the entire process. Most importantly, it can be transformational for specific issues and in specific places.

"Most of the time, we conduct the study and we publish a nice paper and send a report to the government and it sits there. Applicability is low. In this case, we run an intervention, it's more risky but we managed to develop a model that is replicable. But it costs more. Credit goes to IDRC. We could generate the evidence the ministry needed to buy the idea, and we now found a way to work with them to scale the project to four districts."

Dr. Liem T. Nguyen

Institute of Population, Health and Development, Hanoi, Vietnam

"Sri Lanka has paid very little attention to wildlife disease diagnosis and surveillance. Much of the work in this area has been carried out independently by individual scientists or institutes without a coordinated program to achieve a common goal. Therefore, the establishment of SLWHC [the Sri Lanka Wildlife Health Centre] was a timely development as it has provided a platform to coordinate the activities of different institutions towards a common goal. The IDRC-funded project has provided the necessary impetus to mainstream the activities of SLWHC within a short period of time by creating a critical mass of wildlife health scientists in Sri Lanka, developing capacity for wildlife disease diagnosis and surveillance, and creating a broader awareness among the various stakeholders of the need for a One Health approach to control emerging new diseases."

The most widely appreciated aspects of IDRC's grant-making—though not unanimously—is the flexibility of its funding, the adaptability of grants to changing circumstances, and the accessibility of IDRC staff throughout the grant implementation process. Just as a donor's ability to support an idea through different stages of development is valued, so too is the capacity to adapt and adjust to evolving conditions. This requires a strategic deployment of staff and a thoughtful curation of funding opportunities that prioritize researchers and their stakeholders as much as the donor's own agenda. While the studies did not focus specifically on this aspect of IDRC's grant-making, interviewees repeatedly acknowledged that the grants enabled them to pursue their own objectives and vision within IDRC's broad priority areas.

"One aspect that differs IDRC funding from others is the focus on research for development. I also appreciate the practical and flexible approach that IDRC undertakes that allows projects to include/reflect changing context so that the knowledge generated is more relevant over time. Most of all, the space and respect for leadership from Southern Researchers/Experts and a strong focus on capacity strengthening of the project team is praiseworthy. No other donor compares on leadership (particularly women team members) and capacity strengthening (of early and mid-career professionals) efforts that IDRC does."

Dr. Amina Maharjan

ICIMOD, Nepal

"IDRC was very forward thinking when it came to Myanmar – it agreed with us that the evidence for inclusive digital policy making required evidence and that the evidence base was missing in Myanmar. For example, one of the earliest activities it funded us to do was Myanmar's first nationally representative survey of ICT use. This was the first evidence from the ground level. This data was used by multilateral and bi-lateral donors to design their work where they supported the government and private sector in Myanmar to improve digital connectivity and financial inclusion, among other things. IDRC also recognized that civil society capacity was important if they were to influence the government's digital sector policies, and supported the capacity building activities."

Helani Galpaya

Chief Executive Officer, LIRNEasia

"One of the best funders. Respects the identity of the institution, has no agenda it tries to push and has knowledgeable teams."

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

President and Chief Executive at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, India.

Core funding, repeated funding, and flexible funding all represent different degrees of an investment strategy that is attentive and responsive to ideas emerging 'from below,' whether the funds go to international or local organisations. If one key conclusion can be drawn from the two exploratory studies brought together in this report, it is that **demand-driven funding is absolutely essential** for research that makes a real impact on people's lives, and that IDRC is an example of institutional dedication needed to support local ideas adequately.

Yet, not every funding agency embraces this principle to the same extent as IDRC, and IDRC's own funding—like that of any single donor—will always be insufficient in absolute terms. Its work in Asia demonstrates that, in the grand scheme of things, international funding is catalytic. By supporting dedicated institutions, solid ideas, and robust implementation, it empowers researchers to drive meaningful change. Research for development remains a niche space that requires far greater visibility, stronger partnerships, and significantly more funding than it currently receives to unlock its true potential: triggering systemic change.

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

