

Re-building Prestige in Research:

Organizational Case Study of Makerere University

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Restoring research capacity at Uganda's Makerere University has profound implications for the country's future. IDRC sees its role as providing specialized support for researchers.

Founded as a technical school in 1922, Uganda's Makerere University has distinguished itself as one of Africa's premiere educational institutions—especially during its “golden age” in the 1960s—but has also endured great hardships.

The turbulence that came with the rule of Idi Amin in the 1970s, which persisted through the Obote regime of the early 1980s, had a profound impact on Makerere. Teetering near bankruptcy, the university saw its infrastructure eroded, its staff migrate to other jobs or other countries, and the quality of research and teaching decline dramatically.

Since 1990, however, Makerere has been making the arduous climb back to a position of stability and leadership. Internally, the university's administration has pursued a vigorous rebuilding strategy, while the current government has signaled its view of Makerere as a key contributor to Uganda's economic and social development. One indicator of the university's return to prominence is its rise in enrollment from 7,000 students annually in the early 1990s to roughly 30,000 today.

Having supported Makerere since 1972, IDRC maintained its engagement with the University during its difficult times and has continued to lend support to enable this centre of learning to restore its esteemed reputation. The case study findings reflect that this collaboration has taken the exclusive form of support to individual researchers. While other donors have taken and continue to take an “institutional approach” that directs support towards the university per se, IDRC has focused on specific research questions that probe development problems.

Has this approach significantly contributed to building research capacity at Makerere? The case study authors explored this question in detail.

Theoretical and practical gains

On a theoretical level, support for individual scholars is entirely consistent with the goal of boosting the institution's overall stature and capacities. For while a university is defined partly by “tightly coupled”¹ relationships where support for the whole trickles down—in hierarchical fashion—to the component parts,

¹ Tight coupling “means that decisions at one vertical level of the organization regularly have direct, immediate, and significant effects on other levels.” (Lusthaus et al., 9).

it also contains many “loosely coupled”² relationships that allow diverse players to contribute to the whole in a more autonomous, less linear fashion. By focusing on “people’s abilities,” the evaluators conclude that IDRC has been able to apply its comparatively limited resources in ways that complement other donors’ efforts to strengthen the “enabling conditions” required for the overall functioning of the university.

Expressed more practically, IDRC support has helped researchers break with financial and other constraints, such as weak project planning and management skills, or the absence of crucial research infrastructure like bibliographic material, that often makes research undoable. In policy terms, Makerere has had strong intentions to increase its reputation as a research centre, and the government has flagged the institution’s specialization in areas such as appropriate technologies, economics and biotechnology as potentially contributing to Uganda’s Poverty Eradication Action Plan. Still, this “research for development” agenda has not been accompanied by increased funding from the State. So, while many academics struggle with heavier teaching loads (as Makerere looks towards increased enrollment and tuition for financial stability), the study concludes that third-party funding from organizations like IDRC assumes a crucial role. Not only does it allow academics to leave the lecture hall to pursue research; it moves Makerere closer to its goal of being a beacon of innovation by providing the technical support needed to build a corps of motivated and knowledgeable researchers.

Engaged with the substance of research

Key informant interviews with researchers supported by IDRC between 1996 and 2006 revealed that the Centre’s research capacity-building efforts have extended beyond simply “buying time” for research. Their consensus was that, since IDRC Program Officers have significant knowledge of the research themes supported by the Centre, their input into research design, execution and use became a valuable resource for the research community.

Some researchers cited the value of IDRC assistance in writing proposals and project concept papers. “Writing the proposal in itself was a process that deepened my knowledge and understanding and was an exciting experience,” noted one researcher from Makerere. Another mentioned that, “The various comments from IDRC were very constructive and helped me grow.” IDRC staff also provided information, training and advice on research methodology. This applied especially to transdisciplinary and participatory research—approaches with particular utility where complex questions are studied in community settings as is often the case in Uganda and other countries in Africa.

The Centre also assisted researchers towards the latter stages of their projects—for example, by encouraging the dissemination, sharing and publication of research findings. Similarly, program officers provided opportunities for researchers to reflect upon the results and potential applications of their work, and in some cases made arrangements for them to present papers at international conferences.

² Loose coupling is defined as “a situation in which system elements (e.g. parts of an organization) are responsive to each other, but at the same time retain evidence of separateness and identity.” (Lusthaus et al., 9 citing Weick, 1976).

Helping construct networks of researchers with similar interests is another way IDRC has sought to boost the profile and impact of the work with Makerere and reflects how a modest level of support from IDRC provides the legitimacy and credibility that fledgling researchers often need to get a new idea off the ground in the research community. One recipient noted that: “We had this idea of creating a research network on ICTs [information and communication technologies] in Uganda but initially it didn’t work out. IDRC came in and provided funding for a workshop to get the thing started... The workshop helped us kick off the network.”

While IDRC challenged researchers to question their assumptions and move beyond established approaches, researchers felt IDRC also respected its partners’ decisions. Said one: “We had different ideas than IDRC had initially expected. We discussed them and they accepted our ideas. They challenge your thinking but leave you alone and don’t force you to take their view.”

The case study authors summarized IDRC’s multiple capacity-building roles at Makerere as fitting the moulds of *enabler* (by providing funding for research and for conferences and events), *connector* (by linking researchers with their peers and encouraging exchange of views and information), and *advisor* (by providing feed-back and assistance on methodology and skills).

Looking ahead

In the future, the report suggests that there could be potential for enhancing the IDRC and Makerere relationship by bringing the capacity-building aspects of IDRC-supported research with Makerere—which have hitherto remained implied, assumed and sometimes unacknowledged—more into the open. Documenting the particular circumstances where capacity building has occurred may help draw out lessons with more general applicability, which could allow IDRC to capitalize, more than it has in the past, on opportunities for strengthening organizational partnerships.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian crown corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building indigenous research capacity. Because strengthening and mobilizing research capacity is a cornerstone of IDRC’s work, in 2005 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation on capacity development focusing on the processes and results of IDRC support of its Southern partners. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-70623-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html