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IDRC: 40 Years of Ideas, Innovation, and Impact

Bruce Muirhead and Ronald N. Harpelle

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“What makes this history of IDRC so important is that it highlights the critically important role of this agency in enhancing the research capacity of institutions and scholars in the global south via partnership with Canadian institutions and scholars. This is a story of international cooperation for development that very much needed to be told, and the authors tell it very well—mostly from the perspective of the IDRC leadership from its inception with David Hopper until the Maureen O’Neill years. Each leader over the past forty years made a specific and notable contribution. How they did so, under changing political conditions, makes fascinating reading.”

– Henry Veltmeyer, International Development Studies, St. Mary’s University, Halifax, NS; author of *Tools for Change: Handbook in Critical Development Studies* (2010)

“Bruce Muirhead and Ronald Harpelle have produced an engaging, richly detailed, and timely book. Their accessible history demonstrates how a Canadian Crown corporation has become a global leader in advancing research for development that reflects the priorities and concerns of developing countries. They show how IDRC has been consistently ahead of the curve and has positively contributed to Canada’s international reputation. This comprehensive volume reveals why this institution should make all Canadians proud. I strongly urge you to read it.”

– Adam Sneyd, Department of Political Science, University of Guelph

The book focuses on the International Development Research Centre as a unique institution that has funded research in the developing South—research proposed and undertaken by Southern researchers—and how, as a result, it has had tremendous impact despite a relatively small budget. The IDRC is much better known in the developing South than in Canada; in many of the roughly 150 countries in which it has provided research funding it has contributed to creating a very positive image of Canada. The centre’s arms-length relationship with Canadian government assistance provides it with enormous freedom and flexibility—it was established in 1970 with its own act under the Trudeau government. The IDRC board is one-half international and one-half Canadian and is the only governmental agency in the world that has this structure, giving them unique insight into Southern development issues.

One of the IDRC’s founding principles was its insistence on having Southern researchers decide which projects would be put forward for possible funding, and much care has been taken to avoid “research imperialism” or “colonialism.” An analysis of the path less travelled, but which IDRC found amenable, is fundamental to this history of the centre, and the book highlights the decisions, ideas, and practices that flow from this basic premise.

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Bruce Muirhead is a professor in the Department of History at the University of Waterloo and the associate dean, Graduate Studies and Research. He is also a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI). He has written extensively on post-Second World War Canadian commercial, economic, and political history. He is the co-editor, along with Ron Harpelle, of *Long-Term Solutions for a Short-Term World: Canada and Research Development* (WLU Press, 2011).

Ronald N. Harpelle is a historian and filmmaker. He is the author of *The West Indians of Costa Rica* and has written extensively about the West Indian diaspora in Central America. Ron Harpelle is also the director of *In Security*, a documentary film about barbed wire and boundaries, and the co-director of *Banana Split*, a documentary about Canada’s favourite fruit. With Bruce Muirhead he appeared in *Cityoen du Monde*, done for TFO.

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