

# EPILOGUE

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The *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural (CDR)* has been active for 25 years in Central America, the wider Latin American and Caribbean Region and, occasionally, beyond. Operating on the nexus between policy-oriented research and advisory services, the CDR has provided technical assistance and project management support and conducted research and evaluations in the broad field of rural development. Most of its work has been within the framework of external cooperation between international governmental and non-governmental development organizations and partners in the region. The book provides a diversity of topics that have been part of or are related to CDR's work, ranging from territorial development issues to the provision of rural financial services to environmental impact assessment.

Over the last quarter of a century, Latin America and the Caribbean have undergone fundamental changes. Despite the recent economic crisis, income poverty (defined as the number of people living on less than USD 4 per day in purchasing power parity terms) has steadily declined in both absolute and relative terms (poverty data, World Bank). Several countries have experienced sustained periods of political stability and economic growth and consequently evolved from low income status to middle income status or middle income status to high income status. Notwithstanding these positive developments, poverty and inequality remain pervasive. At the national level, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Haiti continue to remain in the lower part of the Human Development Index country ranking (UNDP, 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

Secondly, societal problems such as widespread violent crime, social disintegration as a result of international migration, and environmentally unsustainable land use practices continue to plague the region, with several countries worse off in comparison to 25 years ago. Notwithstanding, with overall increasing levels of development and decreasing poverty levels, many international development organizations have gradually phased out their operations and withdrawn from particular countries or the entire region. At the same time, national capacities in public policy formulation and implementation have markedly increased in most countries as a result of sustained political and institutional stability and better educated staff.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the development of new technologies has profoundly affected people's livelihoods and opportunities to acquire information and do business. This has fostered the integration of global markets and communities, and deeply influenced the ways in which the private sector, civil society and public sector actors operate.

With this complex evolving environment in mind, it is legitimate to raise the question of what could be the future role of an organization such as the CDR. The foundation was established 25 years ago in line with the demands of that time. For the Free University of Amsterdam, the idea

of a satellite in Central America was considered to be the right move to strengthen its research agenda on rural development issues in the region, to provide students with direct exposure to complex local issues and, finally, to foster collaboration with international development actors, mostly from the Netherlands, and contributing to the work of the latter through credible and relevant policy research.

Over time, the CDR gradually evolved into an independent institutional entity with the profile of a service provider in the field of applied development research and technical assistance, with a more flexible link to the Dutch academic community. To be frank, the CDR is a small entity with limited resources and evidently should not be perceived as a major player in the overall state of affairs. This does not mean that its work has had no meaningful impact. The many professionals and students who passed through the organization, the extensive body of policy-oriented research produced on microfinance, sustainable agriculture and other topics, and the numerous organizations that have benefited from its expertise, all point to a substantial and meaningful contribution to research and policy intervention in the field of development in the region.

Looking at the different chapters, one of the main messages coming out of the book is the importance of rigorous and independent assessment. Different types of external assessment, ranging from the evaluation of the effects of reproductive health services interventions (Chapter 3), the economic effects of different rural development strategies (Chapter 2) or the environmental effects of infrastructure projects (Chapters 8 to 10), are discussed in relation to divergent societal problems. In a way, all of the chapters include some type of policy or project assessment perspective. This central message clearly resonates with the profile of the CDR. Evaluation, whether *ex ante* or *ex post*, features prominently as a key activity and competency area in CDR's work.

Over the years, supported by the use of rigorous social science research methods, the CDR has been able to position itself as a credible and independent evaluation partner of (mainly) international development organizations. This has not been an easy process; the balancing act between maintaining an independent perspective in line with international norms and standards of evaluation<sup>3</sup>, while at the same time responding to the demands of the client often creates tensions. Although the international development community has prided itself for its strong evaluation culture, the actual demand for credible evidence as a basis for decision-making may widely differ between organizations.

Several studies (e.g. McNulty, 2012) have observed widespread occurrences of symbolic use of evaluative evidence, i.e. decision makers declare to be assured that an evaluation was done, but may not be interested in the findings. Other policy makers might even show resistance to evidence. All too often, political incentives are not or only partially aligned to decisions that logically flow from the evaluative evidence. Moreover, decision makers often rely on their own theories, or the knowledge, tacit or articulated, among the rank and file of an organization. Existing theories or knowledge may not coincide with evaluative evidence that is generated externally and independently.

Many of the demand side challenges to making policy decisions more evidence-based are beyond the influence of external evaluation service providers such as the CDR. Nevertheless, by assuring that the supply of evidence is grounded in a rigorous and objective – or at least inter-subjective –

process, one removes an important hurdle from the path towards more evidence-informed decision-making. Apart from rigor, candor and the capacity to resist manipulation or pressure that can compromise the findings are also important elements. The truth can hurt, yet ‘speaking truth to power’ (Wildavsky, 1979) is certainly one of the principal missions that organizations such as the CDR should pursue.

With the international development community stepping back and national governments and other national actors stepping up, the mission of ‘speaking truth to power’ will shift towards the latter as they will become more and more the main interlocutors for CDR’s work in the future. Many countries in Latin America have undergone a quite impressive process of institutionalization of evaluation (e.g. Mexico, Chile, Colombia; see for example Gaarder and Briceño, 2010). Regional and national evaluation societies have popped up across the region, and evaluation communities are supported by international organizations such as the World Bank, UN agencies and global evaluation bodies. However, differences between countries and within countries are substantial, contributing to the challenges in developing evidence-based cultures of accountability and learning, instead of steering clear of evaluations. With its long tradition in independent evaluation services, CDR can contribute to these processes.

Inevitably and rightly so, in the near future the CDR will continue to provide technical assistance and conduct evaluations and studies for international development organizations, as their presence will remain of importance in particular sectors and countries in the region. At the same time the role of the CDR in processes of policy and project formulation and implementation managed by local actors in the region may increase. In spite of its small size, CDR has the potential to bring many advantages to the table. Some of these are part and parcel of CDR’s current practices, while others require some thought on how they can be unlocked and integrated into the foundation’s business model. Examples of strengths and opportunities are the following:

- Given the experience of staff on rural development issues in different countries in the region, the CDR can use its potential to develop comparative (cross-country) analyses of particular issues.
- CDR’s empirical experience in the region with roots in the Netherlands continues to be valuable to Dutch and other development organizations that work in the region.
- CDR’s connection with the academic community in the Netherlands can be used for bringing in specialized expertise or for strengthening the methodological capacities of staff. Students and researchers from Dutch universities can use the CDR as their platform for exposure to the complexity of Latin American development processes. At the same time the CDR can serve as a window for building bridges between Dutch and Latin American academic partners.
- The institutional presence of the CDR in academic and policy communities in the region is crucial for guaranteeing the influx of talented staff. In addition, it is essential for the CDR’s institutional sustainability, as a responsive actor to local demands working in collaboration with local actors.

The *Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural* has come a long way since its establishment 25 years ago. Its business model and financial sustainability are intrinsically linked to evaluative and technical assistance demands from institutional actors. At the same time the not for profit nature

of the foundation provides it with the potential to generate valuable public goods such as publications, capacity development initiatives, or to catalyze international (academic) collaboration. If the CDR manages to strengthen its institutional presence in the region, reducing its dependency on the international development community, and if it manages to retain its not-for-profit character through the provision of public goods, then there is a sound basis for another 25 years.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, the 2014 HDI rankings are: Guatemala (125), Honduras (129), Nicaragua (132), and Haiti (168) (UNDP, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> This is partly the result of a growing contingent of civil servants who have received education in the US and Europe, but also due to improved educational systems in the region.

<sup>3</sup> For example the American Evaluation Association, the OECD-DAC, The United Nations Evaluation Group, The Evaluation Cooperation Group and others have developed normative principles for evaluation.

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## References

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