

**Title: External Review of Rimisp-RTD Project:  
Organizational Issues**

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## **Table of Contents**

Executive Summary .....	3
Background of the Study .....	6
Evaluation Findings .....	9
Section 1. Organizational development of Rimisp.....	9
Section 2. Rimisp's network.....	15
Section 3. Positioning and sustainability.....	21
Section 4. Potential expansion to Asia and Africa.....	28
Conclusions: .....	28

### List of Tables, Figures and Boxes

Table 1: Evolution of staff profiles.....	12
Table 2: Funding allocation to Components of RTD.....	22
Table 3: Expenses of RTD per category.....	24
Figure 1: Partners and collaborators.....	15
Figure 2: Participation of organizations.....	16
Figure 3: Evolution of network's members and relationships.....	16
Figure 4: Activities of Rimisp.....	17
Figure 5: Perceptions on the performance of the network.....	17

Annex 1: Acronyms

Annex 2: List of Individuals Interviewed

Annex 3: List of Documents Consulted and Bibliography

Annex 4: Online survey results

Annex 5: Additional data and evidence

Annex 6: Terms of Reference for Evaluation and Biography of Evaluator

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This organizational assessment intends to identify the contributions of IDRC's Core Support for Rural Development Research to Rimisp over the period July, 2007 to October 2011, during which it provided approximately \$2m per year, and other donors provided additional support totalling approximately \$4m. This research and policy influencing program (called Rural Territorial Dynamics (RTD)) addressed rural development integrating and synthesizing policy, practice and intellectual debate at a regional level in a way that links and cuts across different disciplines.

The organizational assessment has four specific objectives:

- 1) Assess the contribution of IDRC support to the sustainability (financial, institutional and thematic) and positioning of Rimisp as an effective organization in Latin America;
- 2) Assess the effectiveness of the IDRC core funding modality to promote the organizational capacity development of Rimisp;
- 3) Review and assess the networks and partnerships developed and used to conduct the research in the program, including issues such as reach, sustainability, effectiveness, shared learning, and buy-in by network participants; and
- 4) Assess the opportunities and constraints to its expansion of geographic coverage to other regions such as Asia and Africa.

For this, it deployed a mix of research methods, including review of documentation relevant to the program and selected key publications; site visits to Chile, Ecuador and Perú; interviews to select RIMISP staff, key network members and representatives of other agencies that ultimately provided co-funding or parallel funding to the program; an online survey to Rimisp's database of contacts (12,000); and consultations with development experts working at the regional level in Asia and Africa

Findings are promising. First of all, IDRC's funding modality has helped Rimisp to strengthen its intended positioning as a world-class rural development knowledge center that can serve as an effective platform for the articulation of multiple partners to revitalize Latin American rural societies. This achievement is largely due to how IDRC's support contributed to a very thoughtful and strategic process of organizational change led by Rimisp as a response to an institutional evaluation carried out by Anthony Bebbington in 2006.

Since 2007, and largely due to a component of the project called *Rimisp's organizational development* to which USD 864,233 were allocated, the institution has been able to advance on key recommendations provided by the evaluation and considered by its leaders as institutional priorities. Main outcomes of this process clearly demonstrate that Rimisp **has become a stronger organization in terms of governance, management, human resources, reach of its work and communications.**

First, Rimisp has created new governance mechanisms that enhanced management practices.

**Governance changes** include:

- The creation of an International Board composed by experts with highly recognized experience in rural development and that provides strategic advice to its most relevant organizational issues.
- The establishment of the position of an Executive Director (to replace the group of principal researchers who founded and led Rimisp as a small and horizontal organization during the first decades of existence). This triggered new internal processes to strengthen strategic planning, management and administration, policy influence, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, and quality control.

- The creation of a Technical Committee, integrated by researchers who lead ongoing projects to discuss relevant projects as well as organizational issues and policies.
- The establishment of the position of an Administration Manager and an Administration Committee, to consolidate and continue enhancing improvements in terms of financial information and administrative management.

Second, and related to the latter, Rimisp has **enhanced its financial information and administrative practices**. First, it hired the firm Deloitte to carry out a diagnosis to define risks and critical points of the accounting system, provide recommendations and then verify implementation of changes in terms of efficiency, efficacy and precision.

It also invested in a new accounting system (Softland), and incorporated and trained new administrative staff. All this played a substantial role in Rimisp's current capacity to provide reliable, sophisticated and updated information to donors, which in turn has leveraged its potential to receive larger donations.

Third, the organization has been able to pave the way for **a new and more diverse generation of researchers** by incorporating 20 new professionals with different backgrounds. This led to increased female participation, incorporation of researchers with new areas of expertise, and interest of several members in improving communications at different levels and through diverse media. New internal leaders are assuming roles that were originally concentrated in Rimisp's founders by leading projects, supervising staff and generating funds for new initiatives.

Fourth, it currently has a **larger and stronger regional presence**. This is mainly due to the intensive and effective work done through its Latin American network of more than 180 partners and collaborators in 11 countries. Due to a distinctive *pass through* policy by which Rimisp derivates significant funding to its partners, the institution has been able to grow **a very diverse and vibrant network** of researchers, policymakers, private companies and civil society organizations interested in rural development. Since 2007, this network has extended its reach (both in terms of quality and quantity), constructed a sense of clear direction and promising results, and increased scope and depth of shared learning.

Fifth, **communications has been significantly enhanced** through the creation of a Communications Unit that participates in the Technical Committee so as to fulfil a strategic role and the development of successful communications products, such as the publication *Equitierra* with more than 5,000 subscriptions and a revamped website with more than 8,000 unique visits per month.

Organizational development has in turn **strengthened Rimisp's positioning and sustainability**. In terms of positioning, by effectively using IDRC's funding Rimisp was able to maintain its spread of activities, increase its research capacity, develop new themes, and build a larger and stronger regional presence in Latin America. Regarding sustainability, Rimisp has been successful in ensuring co-funding for RTD: almost USD 4M has been raised through a combination of larger contributions such as the support of IFAD (USD 1.8M) and NZAP (780.000), co-funding for smaller projects from other donors (which amount to USD 897.000), and contributions of network partners (which added USD 539.212 until August 2011).

All these achievements, plus findings from the scientific assessment performed by Steve Vosti<sup>1</sup>, demonstrate that the Rimisp-RTD network has been remarkably successful in LAC; indeed, it currently holds a leading position in terms of generating research and projects on rural development in the region. Progress made in terms of scientific contributions and organizational development lead to questions about the potential for replicating, or possibly extending the current Rimisp network to other regions such as Asia and Africa, especially under the framework of South-South collaboration.

In this sense, even though a more systematized exploration or a pilot experience could prove that there is an important demand for and interest in Rimisp's knowledge and know how in other regions and that Rimisp has the capacity to respond to it, it would be worth analyzing how such a move may affect an organization that is currently undergoing significant organizational changes. The opportunity costs of expanding activities in Africa or Asia (either directly or via other groups with coaching from Rimisp staff) should be carefully measured so as not to lose sight of ongoing valuable institutional reforms and core regional objectives.

Finally, to make the most of the various and diverse opportunities ahead, there is a set of strategic issues that this research centre could address in the near future. First of all, is the definition of its definite field of work and how bringing in new potential themes could affect its current association with rural development. Second, this scope of themes will also influence who will constitute the new generation of Rimisp's researchers, which is key for the sustainability of the organization. With IDRC's support Rimisp has been able to pave the way for a new and more diverse leadership; still other strategies could be considered to attract and retain highly qualified and committed individuals who can build on what the organization has achieved and become so far. Third, Rimisp could further discuss, define and build a new funding model to build on organizational improvements, sustain its network and current areas of expertise, allow new themes to develop and attract and retain new leadership. Fourth, Rimisp counts today with a set of valuable partners, projects and achievements in Central America and other countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia which it could seize to make progress on the way it organizes its work at regional and sub-regional levels so as to ensure and even increase its regional presence and impact.

It is important to highlight that the organization can build on its **improved mechanisms of governance and management** to address this set of issues. Decision-making processes in terms of future direction can benefit from a cohort of individuals with impressive and varied backgrounds in research, field work and policymaking who are today part of Rimisp's decision-making instances. From internal assets such as the International Board, the Executive Director and the Technical Committee to the most committed and promising members of the network, all of them are in place today to contribute and ensure that Rimisp sustains this achieved **higher-level state in terms of the quality, quantity and geographic scope of their research, organizational development and policy influence activities.**

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<sup>1</sup> Vosti, Steve. *External Review of the Rimisp Rural Territorial Dynamics (RTD) Project: Scientific Contributions and Policy Influence*, December 2011.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study consists of an organizational review of the Core Support for Rural Development Research provided to Rimisp over the period July, 2007 to October 2011, during which IDRC provided approximately \$2m per year of support via project 104513-001, and other donors provided additional core support totalling approximately \$4m.

This program (hereon called RTD, alias Rural Territorial Dynamics) of research addressed rural development in a manner very different to past practice: integrating and synthesizing policy, practice and intellectual debate at a regional level in a way that links and cuts across different disciplines. The initiative was designed and implemented through a networked program involving a diversity of actors.

The *general objective* of this research-based policy advisory and capacity building program was to contribute to the design and implementation of more comprehensive, cross-cutting and effective public policies that will stimulate and support rural territorial dynamics. Specific objectives to strengthen rural territorial development were: (1) inform policies with strategic, research-based analysis of the dynamics of rural territories and of the determinants of change; (2) strengthen the capacity of public and private development agents to engage in policy-making and program-implementation processes; (3) facilitate dialogue and interaction amongst rural development practitioners, policy-makers and researchers from Latin America and other regions on approaches to rural territorial development; (4) strengthen the capacity of selected postgraduate university programs in Central America and the Andes; and (5) support the consolidation of Rimisp as a leading rural development knowledge center. For this purpose, it included 6 components: 1) Applied Research, 2) Capacity Development, 3) International Networking, 4) Postgraduate Training, 5) Rimisp organizational development and 6) Communication.

The program still has seven ½ months to go before it ends in June 2012, with a significant number of ongoing operations that involve about 20% of the IDRC grant and about 40% of the additional (non-IDRC) resources. The scope of the review is the overall program, consisting of the IDRC grant, which attracted co-funding via several other large grants (IFAD, NZAP and Ford Foundation) and smaller grants. The program is managed by Rimisp as one single integrated effort and while Rimisp is accountable to IDRC for the \$10M grant, understanding and review of the IDRC contract needs to take into account the co-funded activities.

The four main tasks issues to be addressed in this external review are:

- Task 1: Assess the contribution of IDRC support to the sustainability (financial, institutional and thematic) and positioning of Rimisp as an effective organization in Latin America.
- Task 2: Assess the effectiveness of the IDRC core funding modality to promote the organizational capacity development of Rimisp, including decision-making processes, internal accountability, governance and how fund raising is facilitated or constrained, along with any changes required for Rimisp's regional and (possibly inter-regional) mandate.
- Task 3: Review and assess the networks and partnerships developed and used to conduct the research in the program, including issues such as reach, sustainability, effectiveness, shared learning, and buy-in by network participants
- Task 4: Given the evaluation's assessment of the progress of Rimisp in achieving its objectives, assess the opportunities and constraints to its expansion of geographic coverage to other regions such as Asia and Africa.

## **Intended Users & Uses of the External Review**

The primary users of this external review are IDRC management and other donors interested in investing in a Rimisp follow-up program. The secondary user would be Rimisp.

The key uses of the external review are:

- accountability for the \$10M investment,
- better understand how the core funding modality affected key dimensions of scientific and organizational performance in the program,
- assess issues that are of special interest to IDRC and supplemental to the coverage by the program monitoring and evaluation activities, and
- provide guidance for future programming.

## **Description of the methodology employed**

A mix of research methods were used in this study:

- Review of documentation relevant to the program including: the initial proposal, annual progress reports, the Rimisp web site, and evaluations conducted by the Rimisp M & E system.
- Review of selected key publications related to the research network, and internal/external documents related to fundraising, communications, and governance.
- Initial orientation meeting at Rimisp offices in Santiago, Chile.
- Site visit to Rimisp Office in Ecuador and to partners in Perú.
- Interviews to selected key RIMISP staff, especially Executive Director, Administrator and Head of Communications Unit, and main coordinators of RTD or those in charge of building and coordinating research networks.
- Telephone and face to face interviews to selected key stakeholders within the research network developed for the program in regions where the program is active.
- Online survey to Rimisp's database of contacts (12,000) as well as members of organizations working on development in Latin America.
- Consultations with development experts working at the regional level in Asia and Africa.
- Interview representatives of other agencies that ultimately provided co-funding or parallel funding to the program (NZ AID, Ford Foundation, IFAD).

## **Reach and limitations of this evaluation**

- First, this evaluation was conducted between August and October 2011, while the Rimisp-RTD program is ongoing. Therefore, there are some remaining activities and allocation of budget that can still affect issues under consideration by this evaluation.
- Second, this evaluation builds on previous internal and external evaluations of the project. Therefore, the focus and what will be presented seeks to complement what has been already said and highlight new issues or changes related to the above described tasks.
- Third, bibliography on analyzed issues has been used whenever available. However, research on organizational development of policy research institutions such as Rimisp is still very incipient. The author has heavily relied on her professional

experience in providing training and technical assistance to leading think tanks in Latin America. Documenting Rimisp's case may help nudge forward scientific knowledge on positioning, sustainability and organizational development of this type of institutions.<sup>2</sup>

- Due to time constraints, interviews with external stakeholders like donors, representatives of international organizations and policymakers have been select. Also, an external study of Rimisp's image could help complement efforts made by this evaluation in terms of assessing changes in Rimisp's positioning.

## **Acknowledgements**

The evaluator is thankful to all those who have made possible this study:

- Rimisp staff (both in Chile and Ecuador) who has continuously provided support to enable this evaluation: from arranging internal and external interviews with relevant stakeholders, to producing a very useful presentation and collecting and systematizing loads of information by request of consultants.
- IDRC Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office was instrumental in launching this study and effectively provided logistical support and guidance.
- External stakeholders ranging from network members to policymakers contributed with their information and reflections to this evaluation; without their insights and reflections this report would not have been produced.
- More than 500 individuals who generously participated in the online survey and provided information and valuable comments, and the assistance of Clara Richards to facilitate this survey and its analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Think Tank Initiative under IDRC's coordination may generate new knowledge in the upcoming years which will improve this type of evaluation.*



## EVALUATION FINDINGS

Section 1 focuses on the direct impact of this contribution in terms of the proposed specific items for **organizational capacity development**. Improvements and future steps regarding organizational development are very tightly linked to those of positioning and sustainability. Therefore, section 2 centres the attention in Rimisp's **positioning and sustainability**, and explores how these have been affected by changes related to organizational development funding, but also due to outcomes under the other components of the project<sup>3</sup>. Third, section 3 assesses how IDRC's support affected the **network**-which is an integral part of Rimisp's identity. Finally, and based on all these findings, section 4 explores the potential of Rimisp to expand its research and networking activities to **Africa and/or Asia**.

### Section 1. Organizational development of Rimisp

Part of the funds provided by IDRC under this project were allocated to Component #5, called *Rimisp Organizational Development*, to which IDRC contributed USD 864,233 (to be called organizational development funding hereon). This inclusion is a clear sign of Rimisp's clarity in terms of the opportunity to strengthen its organization, especially in the context of how such a large project in terms of funding could affect the rest of the institution. It is also important to note that the selection of items to be included in this organizational development funding was very strategic and shared by diverse leaders in the organization: it implied prioritizing among a set of changes recommended by a prior institutional evaluation carried out by Anthony Bebbington in 2006<sup>4</sup> (and commissioned by Rimisp). They chose those changes that required an initial financial investment which was difficult to generate from other projects, but that could at the same time become self-sustainable.

Prioritized items were:

- **Governance and management**, focusing on the establishment of an International Board, an Executive Director position, a portfolio and project management system, and the upgrade of its information technology.
- **Program with three Thematic Groups**<sup>5</sup>, to work within Rimisp and beyond DRT as platforms for learning, synthesis and integration, based on specific projects and other selected strategic activities.
- **Staff development and incentives to innovation**, including a Competitive Innovation Fund to encourage staff and external partners to develop innovative project proposals, approaches and methods, and /or partnerships; and a Fellowship Program so that external experts could work in Rimisp for short periods on projects of common interest.
- **Networking and communication**: to improve the effectiveness of its communications, and to gradually build presence in Central America.

#### 1.1 Governance and management

##### Creation of new governance mechanisms that enhanced management practices

IDRC's support contributed to the creation of four important organizational mechanisms to create a new way of governing the organization. Rimisp had evolved from being a small group of researchers and founders with a limited number of projects and a horizontal relationship (annual budget of USD 200,000-3,000,000 between 1985 and 1994) to a larger organization with more projects and diverse professionals coming from different organizational cultures (annual budget of USD 800,000-2 M between 2000-2007). The need to develop a new

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<sup>3</sup> The other 5 components are: Applied Research, Capacity Development, International Networking, Postgraduate Training and Communication.

<sup>4</sup> Bebbington, A. Rimisp – Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural: An institutional evaluation, July 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Social Learning-Based Capacity development, Rural Territorial Dynamics, and Economic Liberalization, and Trade and Changing Markets for Rural Products and Services.

way of governing was linked with a recommendation from Bebbington: to lessen Rimisp's degree of identification and dependence from one of its original leaders, Julio Berdegue<sup>6</sup>.

*Governance* changes include:

1. The creation of an **International Board** conformed by an impressive and diverse group of experts, most of them with recognized experience on rural development issues. Under the leadership of Ruben Echeverria- this Board currently contributes to Rimisp's governance by:

-Playing an advisory and consulting role, ensuring relevance and quality of Rimisp's most strategic activities. It provides guidance on a continual basis by commitment of its members, even though time constraints often preclude intensive follow-up on specific suggestions.<sup>7</sup>

-Supporting processes of institutionalization within Rimisp so that it becomes more structured and organized with rules and policies that transcend current leaders of the institution.

-Fostering spaces for policy discussion so as to translate technical and academic debates within Rimisp to reflections on policy implications and recommendations.

2. The establishment of the position of **Executive Director** (first occupied by Germán Escobar who was one of the founding members of Rimisp and was appointed by the group of principal researchers; currently held by Claudia Serrano selected through an open contest). This triggered new internal processes, such as:

- Strengthening strategic planning, through the development of the Plan 2011-2013, the document "Field of work" currently under discussion that establishes main themes of focus, and an annual plan for researchers and assistants.
- Developing and implementing new mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation (for more information, see page 13).
- Integrating and coordinating fundraising efforts: each principal researcher is annually required to present to the Executive Director a conceptual note with an idea of a specific project for which funding is needed so as to coordinate and strategize fundraising.
- Fortifying policy influence through the definition of specific policy influence goals and levels of influence for the whole organization and promoting their inclusion in the design of new projects.
- Improving financial and administrative management as explained below in point 4.
- Fostering quality control with specific mechanisms such as having certain proposals peer-reviewed or discussed in the Technical Committee and an Advisory Council for multiannual projects and/or projects with a budget over USD 250,000.

Last but not least, the last selected Executive Director's profile is very well aligned with intended organizational changes in terms of gender (she is a woman)<sup>8</sup>, and deepening policy influence work (she has a track record in policy/politics)<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, since she does not come from the specific rural territorial development field, she is able to expand the scope of discussions and challenge assumptions that become engrained when researchers have been working for many years in the same field and with a similar approach.

3. The creation of the **Technical Committee**, a space integrated by researchers who lead ongoing projects<sup>10</sup> and that meets at least once a month to present and discuss relevant projects as well as internal mechanisms and policies<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> "Rimisp continues to be closely identified with Julio Berdegue. In this one sense Rimisp has not yet escaped the phenomenon apparent in many other NGOs – that of institutionalizing itself beyond the leadership of its founding Director, and of building an institutional identity that is independent of the founding leader's identity. While a reduction of the President's protagonism may occur by default (as other demands on his time increase), it is best not to leave this simply to fate, and instead begin to plan for and to broaden the public faces of Rimisp." (Bebbington: 2006, page 8)

<sup>7</sup> For example, the Board has strongly insisted that Rimisp distills large documents into smaller and more digestible products, which contributed to the production of new communications products.

<sup>8</sup> Objective #7 in Rimisp's Institutional Response to Bebbington's evaluation.

<sup>9</sup> For details, see TORs in Annex 2.

<sup>10</sup> Usually at least one of the decentralized main researchers such as Juan Cheaz (Central America), Claudia Ranaboldo (Bolivia) and Manuel Chiriboga (Ecuador) also virtually participate in the meeting.

4. The establishment of the position of an **Administration Manager and an Administration Committee**, to consolidate and continue enhancing improvements made in terms of financial information and administrative management described below. These two regularly meet with and report to the Executive Director.

### **Enhancement of financial information and administrative practices**

IDRC's organizational development funding represented a turning point for Rimisp in terms of financial and administrative practices, based on the awareness of the need to take the organization into a higher level in the degree, quality and quantity of information for its effective management. RTD, in this sense, generated a set of lessons and incorporation of new practices which relate to sustainability that have been transferred to other projects as well. It allowed the hiring of Deloitte to first carry out a diagnosis to define risks and critical points of the system, provide recommendations and then to verify implementation of changes in terms of efficiency, efficacy and precision of the new accounting system.

Also, the investment in a new accounting system (Softland), along with the incorporation of new staff and the training of administrative staff, played a substantial role in Rimisp's current capacity to provide reliable, sophisticated and updated information to donors. This leveraged its potential to receive larger donations such as Ford Foundation's support of USD 750,000 for a project on subnational governance (2011-2014), for which the foundation required information that would not have been available without the implemented changes. According to some interviewees within Rimisp, the administration department can now also generate good-quality and timely information for researchers to make sound operational decisions.

### ***1.2 Program with Thematic Groups***

Thematic Groups did not work out: Rimisp realized that its small size and ongoing commitments of researchers to many diverse activities (besides ongoing projects), did not allow them to sustain the different conformed groups over time. To promote the intended learning, synthesis and integration sought by this mechanism, Rimisp generated and strengthened instead two other mechanisms: 1) a new policy by which every researcher has to commit at least 25% of his/her time to a project different to the one s/he currently is allocated to ensure cross-learning, and 2) the conduction of bi-annual meetings for all staff, with the inclusion of one day to discuss organizational issues.

### ***1.3 Staff development and innovation***

The main intention for this item was to do a systematic effort to develop a new generation of researchers that rejuvenate Rimisp and eventually can take over its leadership through two specific strategies: a fellowship program and an innovation fund.

The fellowship program was initially designed to attract candidates in the areas of (1) gender, and (2) climate change. In the gender category, the applicants were not judged sufficiently adequate to cover the issues Rimisp desired; in climate change, although they reached an internal agreement on the institution and candidates to involve, the process was stopped during the change of executive directors, with the interim director opting to prioritize other institutional issues during his short mandate. On another hand, the innovation fund was used for the development of conceptual notes and to support some work in territorial development with cultural identity led by Claudia Ranaboldo.

Rimisp was able to promote staff development with some additional strategies as explained next.

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<sup>11</sup> Before each meeting an agenda and related documentation are distributed; a memo is produced after as well. Issues covered by the Committee include: a) detailed discussions on new projects, b) relationships with donors, c) agenda and new activities/alternatives, ongoing projects, d) news or topics of interest in other countries or related to partners, and d) internal administrative and financial issues.

## **Paving the way for a new and more diverse generation of researchers**

As introduced above, Rimisp evolved from a very small and horizontal organization in its first decade to currently count with 43 individuals between professional and administrative staff. Growth was accompanied by a set of concrete mechanisms to identify and develop the new cohort of researchers who in time might replace current leaders with more than 30 years of experience in the field.

First, Rimisp sought to incorporate professionals with diverse backgrounds. In fact, 20 new professionals with different areas of expertise have joined the organization to occupy different positions (for detail, please see Annex 10, page 1). This led to increased female participation (the Executive Director is female and new staff has produced diverse articles and papers on gender), incorporation of researchers with new expertise (policy influence, governance, and decentralization), and interest of several members in improving communications at different levels and through diverse media. The table below shows this evolution:

**Table 1: Evolution of staff profiles (Source: Rimisp)**

	<b>Professional staff</b>	<b>Administrative staff</b>	<b>International Board</b>
2000	3	1 (female)	
2005	7 (6 male, 1 female)	5 (1 male, 4 female)	
2011	33 (20 male, 13 female)	10 (2 male, 8 female)	6 (5 male, 1 female)

New internal leaders are assuming roles that were originally concentrated in one leader. Claudia Serrano is the Executive Director in charge of leading institutional plans and strategies and creating new organizational policies, among other responsibilities. Younger researchers are becoming experts in specific research fields and leading their own initiatives: Eduardo Ramírez (more visibly since he has been working at Rimisp since 1988 - with a brief interval between 1994 and 1998- and has led several projects ranging from USD 30,000-300,000 including the supervision of 2-7 professionals), Félix Modrego and Ignacia Fernández. Ignacia, for example, is currently coordinating four projects, one of which she generated by presenting and winning a proposal for research on conditional cash transfers to a Chilean governmental agency (USD 150,000).

This is coupled by some initial human resources policies to address the need to develop a career staff in order to retain talents: more stability is provided to junior members by stable contractual arrangements; there are more opportunities for growth and professional development (but these vary by senior researcher, some of them are more dynamic and open for young staff to contribute and grow); some like Pilar Jano and Félix Modrego can stay or keep very connected to Rimisp to conduct their Phds; researchers and assistants have annual plans that establish goals for their projects and products.

### **1. 4 Networking and communications**

#### **Increased networking: Larger and stronger regional presence**

Rimisp has taken steps to position and rethink the ways in which it organizes itself and its work geographically, particularly regarding its presence in Central America.<sup>12</sup> To achieve this, two main strategies have been utilized: strengthen its regional network and create/formalize offices in Central America and Ecuador.

Rimisp has expanded its regional reach (especially in terms of diversifying contacts in different levels and in several countries) largely due to the way the network has grown and developed. The research performed through a network strategy was very effective to develop new important partners (such as Prisma in El Salvador

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<sup>12</sup> Bebbington, *op.cit.* page 7.

and Nitlapán in Nicaragua) as well as new projects in Central America that demonstrate that Rimisp has enlarged its presence in this region (for more detail, see page 11).

Another main strategy to consolidate regional presence was the creation of the Central America Office and the establishment of a Rimisp Office in Ecuador. Regarding the former, there have been important advances in terms of generating new and relevant contacts and projects in the region, among them:

- New relationships established with the regional offices of Ford Foundation (Mexico) and ICCO (Managua and La Paz), which led to the support of both for a new project “Alliances for Economic Empowerment” (ICCO, €80,000 ; Ford, USD 100,000); and of Ford for the Project Livelihood Supporting Organizations Learning Group (USD 220,000)
- Establishment of master programs in the universities Heredia in Costa Rica and UCA in Nicaragua.
- Participation in the review of and capacity building activities under the Central American Strategy for Rural Territorial Development (known as ECADERT)

However, several interviewees and also staff from Rimisp expressed that presence in Central America may be even furthered so as to more effectively generate and promote new opportunities as well as strategically make use of existing large programs from governments and international organizations<sup>13</sup>. There is not yet an approved institutional strategy for this sub-region; instead of the Office there is currently a regional coordinator for Central America, Juan Cheaz, working from República Dominicana in some specific projects of the sub-region.

Ecuador, on the other hand, is more a national office than an Andean one: at the sub-regional level, it participates at the Andean Community of Nations<sup>14</sup> and has collaborated in the definition of policies for DTR-IC (cultural identity) in four countries. Projects are frequently based in Ecuador and evidence an important experience in policy influence.<sup>15</sup>

This Office has wide access and knowledge on how to work with policymakers, which turns it into a real asset for upcoming initiatives such as building capacity of other network members on how to respond to policymakers’ needs, interests and demands.

### **Improved communications**

Regarding communications, from the beginning of the project Rimisp decided to conduct an important effort to design and test a new communications strategy. For this, in 2008 it commissioned a consulting firm to develop one (Consultoría Kloo, funded under NZAP’s support to organizational development). Even though it was later revisited, this strategy triggered a vibrant internal debate on the overall role of communications which finally led to the creation of a Communications Unit, which provides support to the institution in general and to projects in particular.

RTD has worked as an example of what can be done in terms of communications to enhance the achievement of project objectives. In fact, the high investment done by RTD in terms of communication generated or

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of opportunities include: 1. USAID-Feed the Future, an open call for UDS 40 M to create business chains in 5 departments of the Altiplano Occidental of Guatemala; 2. IFAD has a program on Pro-markets with the ministers of Agriculture in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras, where they are promoting chains of value for small companies to access markets (ongoing until 2013 with a budget of USD 2 M and AGEXPORT is working with the new government of Guatemala to facilitate public-private partnerships for rural development.

<sup>14</sup> CAN is a sub-regional organization with International legal status. It is formed by Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Venezuela and the organs and institutions of the Andean System of Integration.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of this include: 1) the facilitation of a public-private dialogue for the formulation of policy proposals for the productive sector with the Ministry of Production, Employment and Competitiveness; 2) providing capacity building of local policymakers in the province of Tungurahua for the design and implementation of their rural strategy and their Competitiveness Agenda; and 3) the creation and facilitation of the Rural Dialogue Group of Ecuador which influenced IFAD’s approval of a new \$63 million project for poverty reduction in eight territories of Ecuador, by providing the empirical analysis that supported the territorial focalization, and facilitating consultation for its design.

supported the development of some successful communications products, such as the publication *Equitierra*, which has more than 5,000 subscriptions; increased traffic to the web site which was revamped in 2008 (8258 unique visits were registered between August 1<sup>st</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, 2011); and an average of 97 articles in media per year between 2008-2010.

Furthermore, it was decided that the Communications Coordinator should be part of the Technical Committee, which demonstrates that Rimisp is very well aware of the increased role and value of communications, evidenced by achievements of communications products within RTD.

### ***1.5 Other relevant contributions***

#### **Generation of a culture for M&E**

The M&E Unit established for RTD has contributed to generating a new culture in terms of monitoring and evaluating Rimisp's projects, which used to be done only to respond to donors' requests.

The establishment of the unit for this project served as an incentive to commit additional funding from a general support from NZAP for organizational development (USD 140,000 for two years) to the design of a new system for monitoring, evaluation and generating knowledge for the entire organization (since Roberto Iturralde was in charge of this initiative and at the same time participating in the M&E Unit of RTD, cross-fertilization was possible). The new system developed for Rimisp establishes a set of different products for knowledge generation and evaluation of the projects, according to their budgets, extension and level of complexity. Currently, from all this diverse products -and due to constraints of resources and time- Rimisp is developing lessons learned notes once large projects end (which are different from reports to donors and are to be shared and discussed internally). An example of this type of note is provided in Annex 5, page 2.

### **1.6 Major strategic issues for organizational development**

#### **Developing the next generation of Rimisp**

One of the main issues, that will also affect positioning and sustainability, is to nurture the new generation of researchers/managers. In this sense, organizational development requires that special attention is given to identifying and empowering a new set of decision makers and leaders within the organization (and network). The fact that the Executive Director has included in the Plan 2010-2013 a human resources strategy (which encompasses new policies for training, forming and promoting young staff and recruitment of practitioners and PhD candidates) reflects awareness of this issue.

Still, Rimisp needs to continue its reflection on the most effective and cost-effective strategy/ies to build on emerging figures as a means to bring about the new generation of leaders who will contribute to the development field under the territorial development paradigm. Options currently under Rimisp's analysis are concentrating on how to retain current young staff with promising potential in terms of generating high-quality research, and with communication and fundraising skills; and seeking to engage another cohort of middle-aged researchers with good reputations and credentials who perceive Rimisp as an attractive platform to pursue their career goals.

Attracting and retaining highly qualified staff is a challenge in many think tanks in developing countries. One future option could be to develop a strategic plan with concrete resources and assigned responsibilities to implement and/or test different strategies to address it. For instance, Rimisp could build on the clear sense of ownership among network members who feel part of RTD's network as a source for identifying and attracting new talents who may become Rimisp entrepreneurs in new sub-regions or countries.

## Defining regional and sub-regional roles

From interviews and the online survey<sup>16</sup>, and as will be further argued in the section on Positioning (see page 21) IDRC's support to a large program with strong regional presence such as RTD has allowed Rimisp to enhance its positioning as a regional organization. RTD has provided Rimisp with research and policy influence experiences at the regional and national levels. It has also contributed to an emerging common discursive framework among network members: according to those interviewed, most share the meaning and use of main concepts.

To build on what has been achieved so far, Rimisp has expressed its intention to consolidate its regional role, by becoming a centre of reference for policymakers (similar to the way they consider CEPAL and FAO's reports and recommendations) through, for example, periodic publications with statistics of the region and proposals/ideas. Intensifying coordination of efforts and distribution of roles between Rimisp Chile, the Office in Ecuador, the presence of a researcher in Bolivia (Claudia Ranaboldo) and the Central America coordinator could lead to new joint projects and initiatives at the regional level.

In this direction, Rimisp could also advance in its internal reflections on how to further strengthen its presence in Central America. Taking advantage of the opportunities in that sub-region may require a significant investment in terms of resources (one person to perform the wide array of responsibilities - from the logistics of setting up an office to seeking for funds and being involved in projects- as done until now may not be enough for a more ambitious agenda). In the development of an institutional strategy for this sub-region, Rimisp could include some specific mechanisms to take advantage of its current partnerships in the network such as developing joint projects in new themes of interest for Central America.

## Section 2. RTD's network

### 2.1 What is RTD's network?

**Figure 1: Partners and collaborators**



Source: I. Guijt y R. Iturralde, M&E Report 2010.

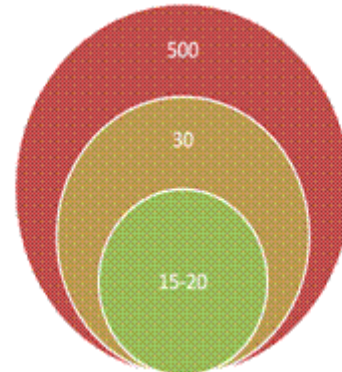
Rimisp is distinguished by its strong network approach (which was present from its very origins). This network is a very valuable institutional asset, not only for Rimisp but for its members, donors, international organisms, etc. as well. This is mainly due to the diversity of its participants (including their very impressive research skills) and capillarity (several members have privileged access to the 'ears' of policymakers and policy analysts), the wide array of interventions it can enable, the platform it becomes for promoting a common vision of rural development and for seeking innovative solutions, and the cross-fertilization and shared learning opportunities.

This network is also unique in its kind: it combines formal and informal relationships in a very peculiar manner which turns it into what other evaluators have already described as a porous mechanism, by which the frontiers between Rimisp and this network are not clear cut.

According to Rimisp, and as reflected in Figure 1, the network consists of 52 partners and 150 collaborators. Partners are organizations of different nature that have a direct relationship with the program for the definition and execution of activities. Usually, they have or have had a short, mid or long-term contractual relationship with Rimisp for the implementation of activities under RTD. On the other hand, collaborators are organizations that participate in the program via network partners.

<sup>16</sup> An online survey that was sent out to 12,000 contacts of Rimisp's database plus a set of other institutions and networks that work in (rural) development in the region such as *ebpdnLA* (275 members), Latin American members of CGIAR (3), and *Consorcio CIES* (16), among others.

Also, as shown in Figure 2, an analysis of individual participation in 16 of key program events reveals a clear pattern with: an inner level (15-20 researchers), second level (30 or so project coordinators/direct colleagues); and incidental others (around 500).<sup>17</sup>



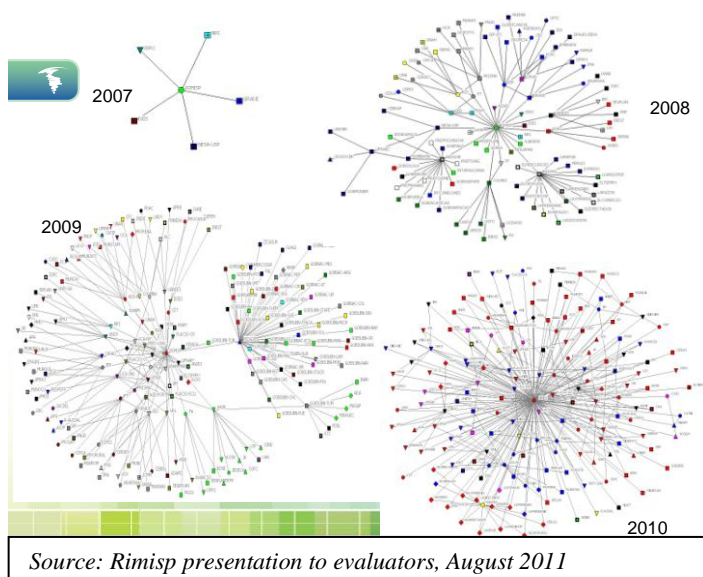
**Figure 2: Participation of organizations**

Source: I. Guijt y R. Iturralde, M&E Report 2010.

Rimisp's documentation of number and type of members is highly consistent with responses from the online survey conducted for this review<sup>18</sup>: 427 persons confirmed that they had been related to Rimisp and the RTD programme within the past three years, out of which 44% said they were members of the network (188). This overall large return almost equals the amount of organizations that participate in the network according to Rimisp, thus revealing a high degree of representation of the large group.

## 2.2 Major contributions from IDRC to RTD's network Extended reach (both in terms of quality and quantity)

**Figure 3: Evolution of network's members and relationships**



Since 2007, as reflected Figure 3, the network has significantly grown in terms of quantity of members, profiles, and flows of relationships. The rate of growth has decreased in recent years: most of the members who answered the survey joined the network during its early days (2007) and new memberships have decreased since then (for more details see Annex 5, page 7). This may dissolve concerns of some interviewees who had pointed out the need to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of such expansion: they argued that though expansion may have brought an increased potential in terms of policy impact, meetings and joint work may become too large and costly.

Extended reach brings increased awareness and interest in Rimisp too: RTD not only extended the

network in terms of number of members but also knowledge of what it does, as can be seen in Figure 4.

In interviews, several network members reported that the network is heterogeneous and inclusive. Again, this is consistent with findings from the survey: 3/4 of members are evenly distributed between three main types of organisations: NGOs (24.8%), government (23.9%) and academia (26.3%). One quarter is shared between members of the private sector (12.7%), international organisations (7.6%) and communitarian organisations (4.8%). This signifies a progress from what previous evaluations had pointed out in terms of limited relationships with national and subnational governments since the current composition reveals a significant government presence.

*The growth in reach is clearly demonstrated by the high rate of responses to the online survey, which was answered by a total of 523 people<sup>1</sup> from 18 Latin American countries and a few from Europe and the United States. Of these 456 (87.2%) stated that they had heard of Rimisp before.*

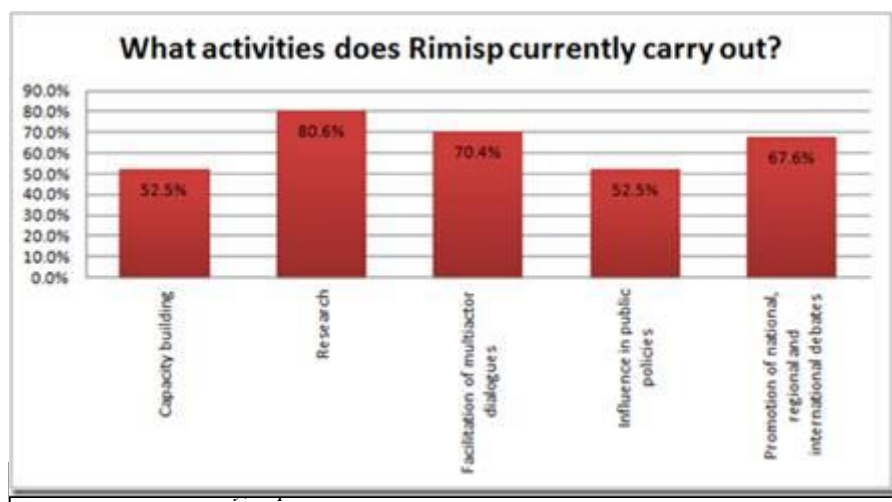
<sup>17</sup> Rimisp, Rural Territorial Dynamics, Annual Report 2010, page 104.

<sup>18</sup> An online survey was sent to Rimisp database (12,000 individuals) in September 2011 and a list of select networks and rural development organizations. The database included both members of the network and non-members. The aim of the survey was to assess the external perception of Rimisp in general and of the RTD network in particular.



However, inclusion of the private sector and social movements is relatively low and a priority due to their important roles at the territorial level. Almost half of the respondents (43%) said they think there are other actors that should be included: organisations working at local level, rural producers and local public administrators.

**Figure 4: Activities of Rimisp**



**A sense of clear direction and effectiveness in its functions**

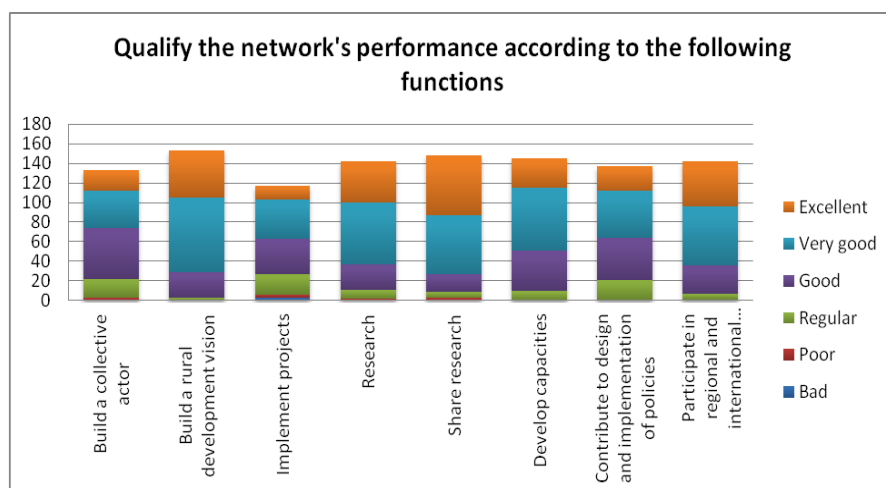
Based on the various evaluations, interviews and the survey, there is a dominating conviction among network members that they have developed an increased shared vision and common approach towards rural development since the launch of RTD. In the survey, respondents agreed that the objectives of the network are “building a rural development vision” (89.1%) and “sharing knowledge” (89.7%). To a

lesser extent, but still considerably high, is the perception the members have of the objectives of “capacity building” (76.9%) and “contribution to the design and implementation of public policies (77.6%).

Also, some network members considered that concrete outputs such as the 19 case studies and the maps are assets on which the network should capitalize in the near future: both to enhance policy influence (which will be analyzed below) and to be recognized as relevant voices in regional and international debates on rural development.

A shared direction, discourse and approach along with a mass of high-quality research and empirical studies have paved the way to increased perception of effectiveness in pursuing its functions, as shown in Figure 5. Almost 90% of the participants considered performance of its different functions as “good” and “excellent”. “Share knowledge” leads among functions, ranked with 41.2% in “excellent”. Other highlighted successes are “new and autonomous contributions” (83% rated this aspect between “good” and “very good” and 12.3% as “excellent”) and the “diversity of actors involved” (rated “very good” by 44.8% and “excellent” 25.9%). Finally, the “quality of research” they produce was evaluated as “very good” by 58.5%.

**Figure 5: Perceptions on the performance of the network**



Source: Online survey, September 2011

Main *obstacles* in terms of performance in some functions were “lack of time” (57.5%) and “heterogeneity of regional programmes” (53.7%), while most important *facilitating factors* mentioned were “Rimisp’s leadership” (84.2%), “freedom of expression” (65.5%) and “knowledge shared” (63.3%). Regarding funds provided by IDRC, 43.9% of respondents considered them as a facilitator for performance.

Last but not least, most of interviewees agreed that without Rimisp’s existence and its network strategy, the rural development landscape in Latin America would be today fragmented, with diverse organizations working at the national and local levels, and less opportunities to share experiences and conduct collective efforts.

### **Increased scope and depth of shared learning:**

The opportunity to learn from others (researcher interactions, presentations of research findings, practical experiences, etc.) is the most frequently cited benefit from belonging to the network by members. It very well makes up for the costs of belonging (mainly some extra time for commitments such as participating in annual meetings, though most of the interviewees did not find costs being high or a burden at all). The main identified advantage of the possibility of learning from others is the opportunity to compare across countries and thus have a regional perspective. In fact, the main purposes for connecting with others are for exchanging opinions (58.5%), participating in virtual forums (44.7%) and sharing lessons learned (41.5%).

89% said they completely agree or partially agree that the quality of their research has improved because they are part of the network. Interviewees added that this has enriched the work they would have carried out only at a national level.

### **The vision that glues members is stronger and the value of belonging is clearer**

Networks are not created out of nothing; they build on priorities of their members: shared vision, common objectives, similar interests, mutual history or collective identity. (Gulati, 1995 in Mendizabal and Hearn, 2011). Alignment of each member's objectives with the overall goals of the network is crucial to ensure and sustain buy-in. Members in general perceived that the network and their organisations objectives are aligned mainly in "sharing knowledge" (78.2%) and "building a rural development vision" (76.3%). Additionally, other important objectives such as "capacity building" and "contribute to the design and implementation of public policies" have a pretty high level of alignment (75% and 67.9% respectively).

There doesn't seem to be a difference between older members and the newest ones regarding the level of alignment of objectives. Organisations that joined the network in 2007 and 2008 have almost the same level of alignment as the organisations that joined in 2010 and 2011. This shows continuity of the network's objectives throughout the years.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, the above described blurring boundaries between Rimisp and the network have not significantly affected the network's vision, objectives, governance, functioning and performance: indeed, as shown in the presented responses (and furthered in Annex 4) there is a homogeneous opinion among the public about Rimisp and the network regarding most of the these aspects, and generally people have a common view of what the network does.

Last, but not least, Rimisp's longstanding philosophy of a significant *pass through* regarding funds is still the key enabler for these benefits to reach core members.

#### ***Benefits of belonging to the network***

***Among the most frequently mentioned reasons to join are being better connected within the region, increased value of their respective 'brands', stronger knowledge of some aspects of the rural development process and the opportunity to learn from Rimisp and from other members.***

## **2.3 Major strategic issues for the network**

### **Establish a network strategy and decide a mechanism for doing this**

One of the most frequent reflections in interviews with members in terms of the network development was related to its future. The network now faces a turning point in its consolidation: as presented above and also demonstrated in the External Review of Rimisp-RTD Project by Vosti, it has grown in its reach, sense of direction, glue between its members, increased its shared learning, produced a body of joint research, and progressed in terms of policy influence. How can Rimisp and its members build on these achievements to have a high impact in the region in terms of rural development changes? What should be done next?

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly -and naturally- there is a slight difference among the types of organisations. NGOs and government selected "build a rural development vision" and "capacity building as their objectives aligned with those of the network whilst private sector and academia prioritized "sharing knowledge".

Members have expressed their wish to continue working together: the challenge resides in how to be creative, strategic and focused enough so as to preserve this rich social capital and invest it with intelligence for future activities (especially in terms of policy influence where there are special expressions of interest in making progress). For instance, some think that both thematic and geographic focus should be considered so as to avoid trying to cover too much and not being able to have a large impact at all levels simultaneously. In contrast, when suggesting main improvements for the network, others mentioned the need to enhance regional coverage, meaning that generalisations sometimes leave out specific topics of certain sub-regions.

An approach that may help to establish a network strategy is that developed by Mendizabal in 2006 and revisited in 2011. It combines four elements: purpose (objective of the network which justifies its existence), role (how it promotes value to its members in pursuit of the purpose), functions (what the network actually does) and form (structural and organisational characteristics, these should follow the functions). This is a functional perspective to look at the network where the network is defined by what it does. The approach recognises five non-exclusive functions:

- Knowledge Management
- Amplification and advocacy
- Community building
- Convene stakeholders
- Mobilise resources

RTD pursues all of these functions in some way. It also has a combination of roles: support and agency. The former means that the members join the network to receive support that will make them more effective in their work; while in the latter, members coordinate their efforts with others and act together as a single agent of change. From what has been expressed in interviews and the survey, there is an opportunity to strengthen the agency role.

By whom and how will the decisions upon these issues be made? Challenges of governance and sustainability emerge. It is true that members feel that representation and decision-making within the network is distributed in between those who think decisions are made by consensus (49.2%) and those who think that is centralised but with previous consultation (46.7%), which shows that members feel they are being considered when making decisions.

However, decisions on ongoing activities differ from strategic planning and from being co-responsible for governance and funding. In these matters, members' and external stakeholders' statements still point out to Rimisp in terms of leading this process and securing funds for this work. Will Rimisp continue to bear alone governance and sustainability on its shoulders or is it time to engage others to contribute to move the network into its next stage? This takes us to the second strategic issue.

### **Rethink the governance of the network**

Interviews to network members and reviews of previous evaluations reveal that the network of partners has still not taken overt ownership of the program. In fact, the Annual Report 2010 pointed out that the Coordination Unit continues to mediate and enable the majority of activities<sup>20</sup>. However, partners are taking on the RTD agenda in different ways: a Gender Group was created by initiative of some members (Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Chile and Susan Paulson). There is also a network of partners in Nicaragua, Guatemala y El Salvador that has developed joint projects beyond RTD (for participation in ECADERT for example).

There are signs of potential new co-leaders, especially within the core group of 15 partners. Still they all look at Rimisp when thinking about the future direction and potential of the work to be done jointly. A second stage of

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<sup>20</sup> Guijt, I. and Iturralde, R. *Annual M&E Report 2010 RTD Program Explaining, Capitalizing and Sustaining a Rich Harvest, February 2011, pages 35-36.*

RTD might prove the adequate instance and timing to reflect on how the core of the network should be governed in the future: whether it will continue to delegate coordination and direction of efforts in Rimisp (with consultation and participation of others) or with other members taking on new roles and responsibilities in creating collective projects, raising funds for them, etc.

### **Strengthen sustainability**

The network shows some signs of sustainability, especially in terms of interest from members in continuing to be engaged (when asked about their plans to keep on working with Rimisp and the network in the upcoming three years, 96.7% of the respondents answered positively), as well as expressions from donors and international organizations in terms of the perceived value of this network, which could lead to new support and additional funding, such as the IFAD one has become.

Continuing participation of members may depend from several factors, one of the most important is the value added that they find in working within the network: 91% out of 122 people said that they completely or partially agree that it improved the quality of research of their organisation. Almost 80% of the respondents also find that being part of the network has improved their organisation's influence in public and corporate policies.

The last point is not minor at all. Even though several members have contributed up to USD 539,212 to RTD (plus in kind contributions, mainly allocating extra time to this initiative), as was mentioned above, none has shown signs of formally joining Rimisp in the search of funding for the next phase of RTD. Moreover, most of the respondents of the survey said that they only dedicate 25% or less of their time to the network, which makes it easier for other funded projects to “buy” this time should no additional funding be provided by Rimisp.

There is a wide existing consensus on the need of extending funding to sustain the network and take it into a higher level of impact. Extending fundraising responsibilities to other core members and expanding co-funding by them could strengthen the network's sustainability, unless the decision is that the network exists as long as it can provide financial support to some members. In fact, an evaluation of IDRC networks suggests that some networks cannot be expected to be sustainable: networks can be very useful means of distributing funding and other resources among their partners in developing countries and can provide excellent channels of research dissemination. Indefinite (or long term) support from an external donor (...) would then be entirely valid as long as it fulfils its functions appropriately. (Winds, 2004 in Mendizabal, 2006)

### **Strengthen advocacy capacity**

Finally, members expressed the need for and interest in both producing more policy -oriented research and in influencing policy outcomes. This is well-echoed in the demand from other stakeholders such as Board members, policymakers, donors, and staff from international organizations. Policy influence has just started for most of consulted members (and also for external stakeholders), and the energy spent in generating regional research has for some implied a cost in terms of advocacy that they had been doing.

It is clear that members are interested in enhancing their policy influence capacity (65.6%). They expressed interest is in learning further on: “strategies for influencing public policies” (65.6%), “capacity to develop strategic alliances” (63.2%) and “strategies to monitor and evaluate actions (62.4%). However, there is a difference between providing members with knowledge, skills and resources for them to influence policies (support role) and becoming a collective actor that builds on the network to jointly conduct policy influence (agency role).

## Section 3. Positioning and sustainability

### 3. Positioning

Bebbington's institutional evaluation (2006)<sup>21</sup> can be used as a valuable baseline to assess progress and achievements in terms of positioning. The author affirmed that "In Latin America there is no center for knowledge generation that has the capacity to synthesize across the region in a way that links policy, practice and academic debate. Rimisp is the closest there is to such a regional center, already the most agile compared with many of other organizations that could conceivably play this role, as well as the most rooted in the worlds of both policy and institutional practice."

Bebbington's recommendations that directly affect Rimisp's positioning included:

- 1) Maintain their spread of activities as it is one of its greatest assets and allows it to create stronger links between research and practice.
- 2) Increase its research capacity so as to make more substantive contributions to rural development and amplify its international visibility.
- 3) Develop new themes to protect its identity as an independent organization, and avoid being exclusively identified with market deepening and to become part of a wider Latin American project.
- 4) Rethink the way it organizes itself and works at the geographic level, especially by consolidating its presence in Central America to be able to learn and contribute to discussions that take place there.
- 5) Finally, Rimisp bore a very intense degree of identification with Julio Berdegué, a very usual trend in NGOs. In this sense, institutionalization and diversification of Rimisp's public faces should be fostered in order to detach the organizational identity from a sole leader.

#### 3.1 Major contributions to RIMISP's positioning

Bebbington's evaluation was well accepted by Rimisp (based on which they produced in July 2006 an institutional response with 11 key points to work on in the future<sup>22</sup>) and very clearly and strategically used when proposing how to use organizational development funding. This reveals the maturity and strategic thinking of its leadership.

Even though specific allocation of funds focused concretely on conducting some specific organizational changes enclosed in Component 5 of the proposal (as described in the previous section), the organizational spill over of the other components of the RTD project to consolidate Rimisp's overall positioning was a clear intention from the design of the project. In fact, in their proposal, Rimisp anticipated that the successful implementation of RTD would benefit from *the further development of Rimisp as a world-class rural development knowledge center that can serve as an effective platform for the articulation of multiple partners, of a sound and viable pro-poor vision and strategy on how to revitalize Latin American rural societies.*

Since 2007, perceptions from various stakeholders such as partners, Board members, and donors (see list of individuals contacted in the context of this evaluation) reveal that Rimisp continues to be a regional organization that is much more active and dynamic in the rural development field than their traditional "competitors" who have played important roles in the past such as IICA, FAO or CEPAL. In fact, Rimisp currently has a virtual monopoly on rural development networking in LAC, thus its 'brand' has huge value in the region. Moreover, these stakeholders repeatedly stated that thanks to Rimisp rural development has not fallen off the political agenda: they have constantly ignited regional and national debates and pushed to keep this issue in the policy radar.

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<sup>21</sup> Bebbington, A. *Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development: An institutional evaluation*, July 2006.

<sup>22</sup> *Respuesta de Rimisp a la evaluación institucional*, Julio 2006 (<http://www.Rimisp.org/FCKeditor/UserFiles/File/documentos/docs/pdf/0239-006409-respuestaRimispversionfinal.pdf>)

A second important attribute of Rimisp’s positioning is related to its intention of serving as a platform for interaction for multiple partners: most of the interviews almost immediately associate Rimisp’s value with its social capital<sup>23</sup>. The network has opened up a variety of relationships with partners in different countries and regions, ranging from research organizations to policymakers, including members with high reputation in terms of the research they produce.

Progress has been made in all recommendations provided by Bebbington: improvements in terms of regional presence (Central America and Ecuador Offices and network) and institutionalization and diversification of public faces (changes in governance and new generation of researchers) have been described in the previous sections.

### Ability to maintain spread of activities

Regarding spread of activities, RTD was designed as a program with very diverse but complementary components: Applied Research, Capacity Development, International Networking, Postgraduate Training and Communications. By supporting such a project, IDRC enabled Rimisp to maintain its spread of activities within its most important program in the last four years.

At the same time, some interviewees such as a member of Advisory Board and some network members report perceptions that Rimisp had become lately too academic oriented, in terms of investing significant resources on research versus policy influence, communications, technical assistance to governments, etc. Some referred to the need of better and earlier defining how research within RTD would be used, others expressed doubts about the applicability of large part of the produced research into the policy and practice realms. As the table below reveals, the levels of allocated funding within RTD to each type of activities confirm this perception<sup>24</sup>:

**Table 2: Funding allocation to Components of RTD**

	TOTAL	TOTAL %
Staff	1,042,983	12%
Research	3,418,203	41%
Capacity development	1,244,682	15%
Advocacy	700,689	8%
Communications	498,609	6%
Organizational development	760,321	9%
Others (M&E, etc.)	692,002	8%
TOTAL	8,357,489	100%

*Source: Rimisp, by request from evaluators*

However, this claim about research having too much weight can be possibly interpreted differently if one considers that this is a natural process within organizations used to conduct multiple types of interventions, with the pendulum moving from periods of greater investment and attention paid to research to periods where there is higher interest and commitment to practical implementation (and the demand, on the contrary, is the need to sustain research).

In terms of funding, a combination of Rimisp’s strategic planning and donors’ flexibility, especially noted in the case of IDRC, has allowed them to decide what to do and

strengthen the diverse types of activities (for instance, reallocating more funding for research from IDRC’s support due to NZAP’s contribution to capacity building in Central America). For more detail on types of activities in different countries, refer to Annex 5, page 8.

Even while the human resources and financial allocation to the diverse types of activities may vary according to organizational stages, evaluations and several interviewees have alerted about the types of activities (implied in the different Components) of RTD being carried out in parallel paths losing opportunities for synergies -at least- and well thought of strategy -at best- that ensured alignment and fitness between the activities. In the 2009 Annual Report, it was suggested that there should be “Greater efforts to integrate analytically as well as practically across the different areas of work research, territorial engagement, post-graduate training,

<sup>23</sup> We follow Pierre Bourdieu, who defined the concept as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition. (Bourdieu 1985, p. 248; 1980).

<sup>24</sup> To see variation among activities in different countries, please refer to Annex, page 3.

communication and international networking.”<sup>25</sup> By the end of 2010 it was “increasingly clear for all involved – the Coordination Unit and partners – that the RTD work and related results cannot be separated into the original program components. Research and capacity building form part of policy influencing.”<sup>26</sup>

Rimisp has been able to sustain its variety of activities partially due to the way RTD was designed. However, it could build in new mechanisms to make better use of their potential intersections so that it can strengthen links between research and practice.

### **Increased research capacity**

As pointed out in the scientific assessment, thanks to RTD Rimisp has increased its research capacity: it has forged new ties and strengthened/deepened ties with researchers in an array of disciplines, and it has developed new analytical tools. For more information on this point, please refer to External Review of Rimisp-RTD Project by Steve Vosti, page 12.

### **Development of new themes, but still in incipient stage**

Bebbington’s third recommendation was that Rimisp should develop new themes to protect its identity as an independent organization. RTD has in fact allowed Rimisp to initiate or further develop research on new topics such as social coalitions, gender, local governance of natural resources, and cities and territories. Donors such as Ford have seen this set of subthemes as an opportunity to support complementary initiatives. For more information on this point, refer to External Review of Rimisp-RTD Project by Steve Vosti, page 13.

## **3.2 Major strategic issues related to positioning**

### **The balance between research and practice**

Rimisp faces an interesting set of potential future scenarios in terms of what to do, how to do it, and with whom. One of the basic choices that will directly affect its positioning is the role that research will have in the organization as a whole, in the career development of its members, and in the other type of activities.

In the face of decreasing funding for international cooperation in Latin America, most notably in terms of funding for research, the challenge sharpens. Interviewees have expressed that there are clear opportunities to put produced knowledge into use (by policymakers at diverse levels, by donors, by the private sector, etc.). Opportunities for Rimisp are diverse: it can participate and add value in numerous initiatives as expressed by their leaders, ranging from putting its wealth of information in formats that are useful for local policymakers and territorial agents (for example, in Tungurahua, Ecuador, they are looking forward to receiving tools from Rimisp to guide them on how to foster rural development), to providing capacity building in large regional strategies (such as ECADERT, Estrategia Centroamericana de Desarrollo Rural Territorial).

The risk is becoming too implementation oriented and facing problems in terms of quality slippage, or lack of time for staff members to write and publish, etc. Thus, Rimisp needs today to explore both through strategic thinking and operational decisions how to develop a new funding model that allows them to continue doing research and publishing as well as landing that knowledge in the policy and practice realms. This point will be furthered in the next section on Sustainability,

### **Institutional commitment to new themes:**

As already pointed out by Bebbington, the lack of formal programs within Rimisp can lead some stakeholders to perceive an organization that mostly responds to external demands (a project versus program-oriented organization). It also implies missing the opportunity of larger synergies, learning and cross-fertilization. In this sense, even though new themes (like climate change and governance) may emerge from RTD and bring about potential new funding, partners and spaces of engagement, the organization still needs to make an institutional decision regarding long term commitment to them: this could mean, for example, incorporating

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<sup>25</sup> 2009 Annual Report. *Rural Territorial Dynamics Program, Rimisp*, page 83.

<sup>26</sup> Guijt, I. and Iturralde, R. *Annual M&E Report 2010 RTD Program Explaining, Capitalizing and Sustaining a Rich Harvest, February 2011*, page 27.

principal researchers who are experts in these topics and providing them with institutional support in terms of communications, fundraising, etc. In this direction, a promising signal is the internal discussion on the strategic objectives for the organization, and in consequence, on the definition of its field of work. This process led to the development of the above mentioned document “Campo de trabajo” (Field of work) where Rimisp establishes its future focus on two very broad themes: non-metropolitan territories and agriculture and food safety, from the perspective of economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

The current set of proposals being discussed internally and with donors has yet to reflect the in-house decision regarding priority themes for research, but one would expect a time lag between deciding on a new set of themes and fundraising efforts. How this document leads to effective decision-making regarding what projects are presented to donors or conducted if requested by donors/governments is still to be observed.

Last but not least, commitment to new themes should be analyzed under the light of Rimisp’s positioning as a world-class **rural development** knowledge center. What would potential new themes mean for its current identity and positioning?

## Section 4. Contribution to the sustainability of Rimisp

### 4.1 Major contributions to Rimisp’s sustainability

#### Diversification of funding sources for RTD

One of the main strategies to ensure financial sustainability for NGOs, especially when they receive a large support for one main donor (such as RTD is for Rimisp), is to seek and guarantee diversification of funding sources. This is important for sustainability and for reputation (being independent). Diversification can encompass co-funding from other donors for a large program and also other sources of funding for the organization in general (governmental, international cooperation, private sector, individuals, etc.)

Sustainability challenges were clear for Rimisp when the project was designed; thus, one decision was to develop a strategy to achieve the co-funding of RTD. So far, co-funding for the program as a whole or specific components and/or countries has achieved what was originally proposed: around 4 M. The table below reports expenses per category according to each donor until August 2011.

**Table 3: Expenses of RTD per category**

	IDRC	IFAD	NZAP	TOTAL OTHERS	TOTAL
Staff	789,011	155,556	98,416	253,972	1,042,983
Research	3,418,203	0	0	0	3,418,203
Capacity development	1,011,934	4,721	228,027	232,748	1,244,682
Advocacy	250,000	245,986	204,704	450,689	700,689
Communications	348,609	75,000	75,000	150,000	498,609
Organizational development	760,321	0	0	0	760,321
Others (M&E, etc.)	531,681	59,334	100,987	160,321	692,002
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,109,759</b>	<b>540,596</b>	<b>707,134</b>	<b>1,247,730</b>	<b>8,357,489</b>

*Source: Produced by Rimisp per consultants’ request. These cover the period from day one of each contract, up until 30 August 2011 (or less in the case of the NZAP project that ended operations in April 2011).*

It is important to note that not only was IDRC’s grant useful to lever up large funding from IFAD and NZAP, but as was mentioned above it also was flexible to allow Rimisp to make some revisions along the way as they integrated other funds, which implied, for example, changes in the original log-frame of the project. In the case of NZAP, RTD’s and their objectives were very similar; they had already worked to together in other projects; they were especially interested in Central America (and IDRC’s flexibility allowed the addition of El Salvador as the 11<sup>th</sup> country to respond to NZAP’s interest in four Central American countries) and valued the importance that was being given to policy influence and capacity development. IFAD appreciated the



exponential scope of RTD (due to the duration and geographic coverage) and its potential impact, not only in terms of quantity but also quality of work of network members.

Additionally, Rimisp obtained co-funding for smaller projects from other donors, which amount to USD 897,000, and by network partners, which added USD 539,212 until August 2011. The latter does not include in kind contributions and additional time allocated by researchers to activities related to the program for which they were not remunerated. Therefore, total co-funding spent up to this date is of USD 2,683,942. To this, additional USD 1.3 M from IFAD for the upcoming years has to be added.

Furthermore, IDRC's large support has been a leverage to attract funding for related projects such as Ford's contribution of USD 750,000 for a project on subnational governance.

Finally, diversification of funding of sources for the whole Rimisp continues to be similar to what used to be before DTR.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, new sources such as private sector and government are being pursued with some positive signs of progress. The most promising (confidential and yet to be confirmed) is a project under discussion with an important private association, an idea that which emerged from work under the Fondo de Incidencia within RTD. Regarding governmental support from national agencies, in September 2011 Rimisp was awarded a grant by FONDECYT (the funding arm of CONICYT, a Chilean governmental agency), for a research project to look at the links between territorial dynamics and social investments (conditional cash transfers); in which they made use of data and concepts from RTD. A total of 262 projects were approved, including Rimisp's, the only one from a think tank/NGO (these funds are usually allocated to public universities).

#### ***Other contributions***

Regarding institutional sustainability, and as Bebbington pointed out in his evaluation, an effective human resources strategy is crucial. In this regard, another contribution which has already been analyzed is the increased capacity of attracting and developing of young researchers and project managers.

Additionally, new leaderships are also emerging within the network of partners. This, along with the stated intention of many of them to continue working with Rimisp under a common vision to promote rural development constitutes an interesting platform to build on in terms of institutional sustainability. However, this platform currently (and still largely) depends on ensuring financial support for its activities: if funding support for RTD is not continued, it is highly likely that most of the partners will turn energy and attention to other funded projects which could transform the network into a place where knowledge is shared, but not longer produced.

Finally, thematic sustainability remains a challenge. Working with a 5 year time horizon and with a largely significant budget has enabled Rimisp to widen its scope of work: new partners, new countries, new governmental contacts and demands have all brought together various opportunities to work on new topics, outside those mandated by RTD. This has triggered an internal process of reflection, first informally, but increasingly formal on what Rimisp will focus on in the upcoming years (partially documented in the mentioned document "Field of work").

## **4.2 Major strategic issues for sustainability**

### **Continuation of RTD**

Since 2009, Rimisp has been preparing itself for the usual changes in NGOs that depend on external funding, by gradually reducing overhead costs, reducing scope of activities in RTD, etc. Rimisp is characterized by a lean and mean modus operandi which provides them with flexibility enough to move into other projects, if needed.

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<sup>27</sup> For details, please see Annex 5, pages 8-9.

However, there are reasonable expectations of ensuring more funding for RTD. This evaluation has already presented some positive signals in terms of opportunities to seize what the project has already produced (both by supply and to respond to the demand) as well as initiate or continue some new lines of work.

### **Aligning a new organizational model of funding and fundraising with RTD, existing areas and new themes**

Institutional reflections and decisions in terms of the scope, themes and types of activities to be sustained in the future cannot be detached from a clear view and decisions on the desired future funding model. These models range from organizations that are almost 100% project-based to others that count with an important institutional support by means of corporate and individual philanthropy. Other possibilities could be creating a formal consulting branch or having a systematized offer of capacity development to a diverse set of donors, NGOs, policymakers, etc. The combination of funding sources (level of diversification and weight of each type) and how these are internally managed has direct implications in how RTD, other current areas of work (such as evaluation) and emerging themes will be sustained and/or grown within Rimisp.

An explicit and agreed-upon funding model should also imply decisions on how fundraising will be conducted and who will do it. There is already a specific change in this direction in terms of institutionalizing the search for funds. While this relied 100% on principal researchers who interacted with potential donors and coordination was rather tacit, the new Executive Director is implementing new mechanisms to ensure coordination and alignment with the agreed upon “Field of work” of Rimisp.

There is also now an instance of institutional push to try to leverage what projects produce and raise in order to strengthen and balance the organization as a whole. IDRC’s support to RTD (especially in terms of including organizational development funding) can be used as an effective example in many analyzed aspects on how an entire organization can benefit from a specific project, for example by enhancing its positioning, its governance and for creating new policies and practices.

### **Ability to sustain a new Rimisp with more management and administrative support**

Gains in terms of governance, administrative and financial practices, etc. also imply that sustaining the whole organization is much more expensive (they now need to fund positions such as an Executive Director and the Administration Manager, meetings of International Board, increased number of administrative staff, etc.). This has significantly increased Rimisp’s overhead. Some interviewees considered that the low overhead rate at Rimisp (15%) should be re-discussed since it is regarded as too low to make the kinds of investments in personnel, etc. required for long-term sustainability (unless the organization continues to obtain organizational development funding).

Changes in IDRC’s support could severely affect the institution, due to the dimension that the amount of funds for RTD have today, compared to other existing projects. Preventive measures have been taken in terms of gradually reducing costs (rented space for offices, non renovation of some contracts, etc.) Before 2007, Rimisp was capable of raising an average income of USD 4 million (an average of income between years 2004-2007)<sup>28</sup> to support its operations through projects; currently its average expenses are of USD 6.8 million. Rimisp staff has been very active in searching for new funding sources. Currently there are 20 projects in pipeline (of very diverse stages of development, ranging from those that are a very early stage (idea) to others in final negotiation with donors). These outstanding proposals add up to more than USD 1 M.

This leads again to the organizational opportunity of designing and implementing a new funding model that can sustain the type of highly recognized organization that IDRC’s support has enabled Rimisp to become.

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<sup>28</sup> For details, see Annex 3, page 4.

## **Section 4: Opportunities and constraints to expansion of Rimisp to other regions such as Asia and Africa**

The Rimisp-RTD network has been remarkably successful in LAC; indeed, it currently holds a leading position in terms of generating research and projects on rural development in the region. Progress made in terms of scientific contributions and organizational development lead to questions about the potential for replicating, or possibly extending the current Rimisp network to other regions, especially under the framework of South-South collaboration.

First, working at the global level with organizations from other developing countries is not new for Rimisp, not even for RTD. Just as a current example, the organization is currently participating in a project funded by Ford Foundation where institutions from Latin America, Africa and Asia are sharing lessons learned on sustainable livelihoods.

Second, regarding RTD specifically, together with government agencies in India, China, South Africa and Brazil, in 2010 the program brought together over 200 participants for an international conference on rural transformation in emerging countries. The Head of State of India, as well as Ministers and other senior officials from the four nations, exchanged viewpoints with delegates from academic institutions and civil society organizations during the conference. The resulting New Delhi Declaration has already inspired a number of actions in participating countries, including an active South-South support for the new rural development policy that the South African government is designing.

Third, decreasing international cooperation in Latin America will require organizations in this region to be more creative in terms of fundraising. There are several ongoing South-South collaboration initiatives (for example, the ELLA program by DFID<sup>29</sup>) that Rimisp could explore to do some pilot experience in terms of complementing current funding sources.

On the other hand, there are also several constraints that should be considered in an eventual exploration and discussion on how Rimisp can expand to other regions:

First, the territorial approach has not yet permeated several donors that support organizations in Asia and Africa. In the case of Ford Foundation, for instance, the prevailing paradigm is local development and value chains; thus, advocacy should be done first within this type of donors to generate some critical support from the offer side. Rimisp has been very effective in convincing some international organisations on incorporating the territorial approach in their programs (IFAD, IADB, etc.) so there is a capacity there that could be seized to strengthen donor support for this type of interventions.

Second, the LAC network owes much of its success and longevity to a core group of partners with very solid research and publication track records. Regions like Sub-Saharan Africa probably lack this 'core' set of partners on which to build a Rimisp-style network.

Third, the notion of territories might be more complicated to practically articulate in the context of Africa for several reasons. The potential for the fragmentation of the sub-continent into many, many territories looms large. For example, there are over fifty different languages spoken in Burkina Faso alone, and the lands occupied by each one of the language/culture groups might qualify for territory status.

Fourth and needless to say, fairly significant increases in staffing would be required to initiate network activities in any new region, and the linguistic skill sets (at least) of new hires would be different from those possessed by most of the current staff. Linked to this, it is important to bear in mind that most of Rimisp's research production is currently in Spanish.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/what-we-do/research-and-evidence/evidence-and-lessons-from-latin-america/>

Thus, one key question to guide a potential more rigorous and systematized exploration of the value of expanding the network's activities to other regions is: what can South-South collaboration contribute to Rimisp's strategic goals in the next years and what can Rimisp bring to organizations in Africa and Asia (and, why not, Middle East)? How can alignment between Rimisp's current capacities and genuine demands and interests from these regions in terms of knowledge be ensured?

Along these lines, an exploratory study could be performed to further analyze:

- 1) Existing demand and interest in these regions for another network or for Rimisp's knowledge, maybe by defining some specific sub-topics under the broad rural development field
- 2) Detect stakeholders who could benefit from Rimisp's production and know how
- 3) Opportunities to join ongoing efforts
- 4) Advantages and objectives of expansion for Rimisp
- 5) Required level of systematization and knowledge management by Rimisp to meet the demand

Even though a more systematized exploration or a pilot experience could prove that there is an important demand for and interest in Rimisp's knowledge and know how in other regions and that it has the capacity to respond to it, how would this decision affect an organization that is currently undergoing significant organizational changes, as presented above? Rimisp is in the process of remoulding itself institutionally, including pending decisions on with how best to consolidate activities in LAC (e.g., in Central America). The opportunity costs of expanding activities in Africa or Asia (either directly or via other groups with coaching from Rimisp staff) should be carefully measured so as not to lose sight of ongoing valuable institutional reforms and core regional objectives.

## Conclusion

Main outcomes of this project clearly demonstrate that Rimisp has become a stronger organization in terms of governance, management, human resources, reach of its work and communications. This has in turn helped to strengthen its positioning as leading rural development knowledge center in Latin America and an effective platform for the articulation of multiple partners. The main organizational strategy in this sense has been to constantly grow and nurture its very diverse and vibrant network of more than 180 partners and collaborators who currently share a sense of clear direction in terms of research and policy influence in rural development.

There is a set of strategic issues to be further discussed and explored in the near future, the most important of which are: 1) consolidating a new leadership of highly qualified and committed researchers that sustain –and even expand– Rimisp's impact in the whole region, and 2) continuing discussions and defining its future field of work. These two issues are tightly linked with strengthening a funding model that ensures organizational sustainability.

Thanks to its strategic planning and efforts in terms of organizational development, Rimisp can today rely on **improved mechanisms of governance and management** to address this set of issues. Decision-making processes in terms of future direction can benefit from a cohort of individuals with impressive and varied backgrounds in research, field work and policymaking who are today part of Rimisp's decision-making instances. From internal assets such as the International Board, the Executive Director and the Technical Committee to the most committed and promising members of the network, all of them are in place today to contribute and ensure that Rimisp sustains this achieved **higher-level state in terms of the quality, quantity and geographic scope of their research, organizational development and policy influence activities.**