Pan Asia Networking External Panel Review

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Executive Summary

1. This External Review was commissioned by IDRC in 2010 to review the current third phase of its Pan Asia Networking (PAN) Programme, which between 2005 and April 2010 had allocated $31,886,517 to 81 projects (and 34 supplements).

2. Methodologically, six main approaches were used by the Panel systematically to garner as diverse and comprehensive information as possible: a review of PAN's core program documentation; 42 interviews with the PAN team, grantees and other stakeholders; reviews of all of the documentation associated with 35 of the projects and supplements from this phase; assessments of the quality of 40 research publications; an electronic survey; and an analysis of web statistics relating to PAN on IDRC's site.

3. There is strong evidence from grantees, stakeholders and the documentation reviewed that this third phase of PAN has delivered effectively on its mission of "*empowering communities to address their key development challenges through effective access to information and communication technologies*".

4. With respect to the implementation of the PAN prospectus the Panel notes that:
- The flexibility and agility of the PAN team was widely respected and enabled it to support and implement appropriate and timely projects within the rapidly evolving ICT4D field;
- The open, collegial and transparent management style within the PAN team enabled diverse approaches and expertise to be utilised to best effect in delivering the program; and
- The PAN team established effective and supportive relationships with most of its grantees, partners and recipients.

5. In terms of the quality of research outputs and publications, the Panel concludes that:
- Few publications reach highest levels of academic quality, but on average scientific quality of publications is acceptable, fulfilling the objective set by prospectus and demonstrating a marked improvement over the previous program cycle;
- Publications typically score higher for quality indicators that go beyond measuring narrow academic excellence and include utility, readability and novelty value; and,
- The overall mix of research strategies, topics and output formats is conducive to meeting broader objectives of quality, influence, ownership, capacity-building, and innovation, which are not easy to balance and are at times difficult to reconcile.

6. The Panel's key findings relating to the program outcomes are:
- The Panel can largely substantiate what PAN found as its outcomes in the Prospectus Final Report(PFR), with some clarifications and remaining questions;
- There is a continued need for a small grants program;
- Capacity-building and networks have allowed PAN to deliver its core objectives;
- Gender was at the forefront of the prospectus. Although it is not yet fully mainstreamed, greater emphasis was placed on gender by project teams towards the end of the period of time under review.

- There is concern about potential pressure to move projects away from lesser developed countries in order to find research partners more likely to generate timely and substantive outcomes.

1. Introduction

1.1 *Context of the evaluation*

The International Development Research Centre's (IDRC's) Pan Asia Networking (PAN) program was originally conceived in 1994 in response to needs expressed by researchers and policy institutions in Asia. There were four initial focal points to the program: connectivity infrastructure, content development, communication and networking, and collaborative research on information and communication technology (ICT) policies. External reviews of the program were undertaken in 1999 and in 2005. In the light of the second of these and a regional stakeholders meeting in 2005, a new Prospectus for the third phase of PAN was produced in February 2006 to run until 2011. PAN's mission as expressed therein is "*empowering communities to address their key development challenges through effective access to information and communication technologies*". This vision is supported by targeted research support in three areas:

- *Building evidence and promoting dialogue to inform policies that enable knowledge societies in Asia*;
- *Applied research and piloting of innovative ICT applications for development*; and
- *Research and build capacity for understanding the socio-economic effects of ICTs on Asian communities*.

Between the start of 2005 and April 2010, within the current phase PAN had allocated $31,886,517 in total to 81 projects (and 34 supplements), of which 54% was to technology projects, 22% to policy projects, and 18% to effects, with the remaining 6% to corporate and program initiatives.

Our external review was tasked with judging the strengths and weaknesses of the program in terms of four questions:

1. *To what extent was the implementation of the program's prospectus appropriate*?
2. *Overall, was the quality of the research outputs/publications supported by the program acceptable (given the context/intended purpose/etc.)*?
3. *To what extent are the program's outcomes relevant, valuable and significant*?
4. *What are the key issues for the Centre's Board of Governors*?

1.2 *Our approach and methodology*

The Panel (Annex 11) adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to address these questions, seeking in particular to explore what PAN team members, grantees, and other stakeholders had to say about their experiences of the program. In so doing, we sought to explore systematically as much diversity within the program as possible during the four-month period leading up to July 2010. Six main methods were used:

- Review of core program documents (Annex 8) provided by the PAN team, focusing especially on the Prospectus, the Prospectus Final Report (PFR), and existing external evaluations of elements of the PAN program;
- Interviews (see Annex 1) were conducted with 45 members of the PAN team, grantees, and other experts, mostly by phone and lasting approximately one hour;
- Reviews were undertaken according to an agreed template of all of the project documents of 35 of the 115 projects and supplements supported by PAN (Annex 3);

- Reviewing and scoring the quality of the 40 monographs and peer-reviewed journal publications produced by PAN staff and grantees (Annex 2);
- Web-based survey, for which 6 replies were received (Annex 4);
- Analysis of web-statistics relating to the PAN program provided by IDRC (Annex 10).

1.3 *Challenges and limitations*

Throughout, the Panel was very conscious of the challenges associated with differences in definition and understanding relating to some of the key issues under review. Five definitional issues stand out as being particularly problematic: research quality, relevance, significance, appropriateness, and the distinction between outputs and outcomes (for a detailed discussion, see Annex 14). As a general rule, though, the Panel was eager to understand how members of the PAN team, their grantees and other stakeholders interviewed conceptualised these issues, rather than seeking to impose its own interpretations upon them. The Panel is also conscious that the evaluation is based on a relatively swift review of largely secondary material. Whilst the robustness of the methods adopted (Annexes 1-4) gives confidence in the conclusions drawn, the Panel wishes to emphasize that these have not been verified from practical engagement on the ground with PAN's projects in Asia. Moreover, the framing of the terms of reference, with their emphasis on validation of the PFR, means that the Panel has not had the opportunity to interview as many people as it would have liked who have not been directly involved with the PAN program. This report therefore focuses primarily on the internal aspects of the program, and does not seek to reach broader conclusions as to the wider influence PAN might have had on the field of ICT4D more generally in Asia.

2. Appropriateness of Program Prospectus Implementation

Key findings
- The *flexibility* and *agility* of the PAN team was widely respected and enabled it to support and implement appropriate and timely projects within the rapidly evolving ICT4D field
- The *open*, *collegial* and *transparent* management style within the PAN team enabled diverse approaches and expertise to be used to best effect in delivering the program
- The PAN team established *effective* and *supportive relationships* with most of its grantees, partners and recipients

This section of the report validates (1) the coherence and appropriateness of the choices made and priorities set by the program to adapt and/or evolve its strategies from what was outlined originally in the prospectus, and (2) the strategic lessons the program drew from its experience. The Panel's overwhelming conclusion is that the implementation of the PAN Prospectus was indeed appropriate, and that the program adapted flexibly and with agility to evolving circumstances in the rapidly changing field of ICT4D, notably the increasing availability of digital infrastructures, dramatic growth of mobile technologies, and the social and cultural implications of new social networking environments.

2.1 The Prospectus
2.1.1 *Prospectus overview: policies, technologies and effects*
The Prospectus identified PAN's mission as being to empower communities to address their key development challenges through effective access to ICTs. It sought to do this through three key themes: building evidence and promoting dialogue to inform *policies* that enable knowledge societies in Asia; applied research and piloting of innovative ICT applications for development (*technologies*); and research and capacity building for understanding the socio-economic *effects* of ICTs on Asian communities (Annex 11). The three main means of delivering these directions were: supporting the development of research networks, building country programs and establishing competitive grants. The Prospectus provided a broad framework and vision for the program, and the team used this structure creatively to develop a coherent and appropriate program. This flexibility nevertheless means that it is not always easy to trace how aspects of specific funded projects actually delivered directly on particular aspects of the Prospectus.

2.1.2 *Coherence and Appropriateness*
For the purpose of this evaluation, and based on responses by interviewees with respect to PAN's work, the Panel focused particularly on the *management structure*, the ways in which *evaluation and feedback* mechanisms are incorporated into the evolution of the program, and the *methods* used to choose which projects were supported. With respect to appropriateness, the following themes are addressed: the Asian ICT context within which the program has evolved, the balance between PAN's portfolio of activities, decision making processes, and the risks associated with support for specific activities.

2.2 The evolution of PAN's strategies
2.2.1 *The PAN team's choices and priorities*
The Prospectus Final Report (PFR) emphasized that the PAN team largely followed the original thematic and program directions. Networks accounted for 54% of PAN's budget, country programs accounted for 10% and competitive grants 8% (with the remainder being shared between conferences, workshops and collaboration with other IDRC programs). Lack of an appropriate champion institution meant that the proposed Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) network was not formed, but two other networks (on privacy and censorship) were created that had not been directly planned for in the Prospectus. Country programs were cut back because it was recognised that delivery of the programs in Cambodia and Mongolia was more challenging than had been anticipated, and there were insufficient human resources within the PAN team (Annex 9) effectively to support such capacity development. Increased core funding from DFID led to greater emphasis being placed on research communications.

In determining the balance between policies, technologies and effects, the team sought to ensure that their work responded to the needs of researchers and policy-makers in the Asian context, focusing especially on South and South-East Asia. Given the delay between undertaking research and the results of that research influencing policy, there is evidence that much of the current policy impact of PAN's work reflects work done by partners that had already received funding under the previous Prospectus. The issue of attribution is an ongoing challenge in verifying impact. The Panel recognizes the difficulty

in tracing connections between funding streams and specific activities, but the short period of this evaluation did not allow attribution to be substantiated.

2.2.2 *Reflections on the team's strategic choices: timing, management, evaluation and thematic delivery*

The earlier part of the current program phase saw a *transitioning* of project choices as well as the expectations of grantees from previous PAN priorities to the new ones. This was particularly evident, for example, in the emphasis placed on gender mainstreaming and on the communication of research findings.

Almost all interviewees commented positively on the professionalism, commitment and knowledge of members of the *PAN team* (Annex 9). Grantees particularly praised the team's intellectual support, pro-active problem solving and refocusing of activities where necessary. As one particularly enthusiastic interviewee put it: "*IDRC is the best funder we've ever had. Not because they have vast amounts of money, but the leadership is a pleasure to work with and the framework so flexible, it allows you to find your own way*".The PAN team included people with a diversity of expertise. Team members commented especially positively on the collegial leadership style within the team, and its ability to utilise the diversity of opinions and approaches within the team to best effect in delivering its projects. Such diversity was crucial in ensuring that appropriate support and advice could be given to project leaders delivering such a complex and wide-ranging set of activities. Some interviewees expressed concerns about the dilution of management and control in large networks, particularly those where aspects of their research were subcontracted, and the responsibility for the project management rested with the main network partners rather than with members of the PAN team. Logistically, it was not possible for members of the PAN team frequently to visit all research partners in these large networks, and so the support and monitoring of their delivery had to rely on the main project grant recipient. Sub-grantees, who are often the main intended ultimate beneficiaries of PAN's work, occasionally mentioned that they too would have liked to have benefited more from the PAN team's direct expertise.

The rigour with which the team visited and reviewed projects was notable, and this careful *monitoring* enabled them to support and steer projects back on course where necessary. The openness and honesty of commentary within the Rolling Project Completion Reports was outstanding, not only enabling the Panel to have deep insights into the processes with which the team addressed emergent issues, but also providing a real guarantee that IDRC's funding was being carefully nurtured. This rigour also enabled PAN to take the calculated risks necessary to ensure an innovative program. The external evaluation on networks was used by PAN to place greater emphasis on issues of network sustainability, through funding capacity development for evaluation, research mobilization and communicating for influence. Other external evaluations have only recently been completed, and have not therefore had significant influence on the direction of the program, albeit they have the potential to do so.

With respect to IDRC *mainstreaming issues of gender and partnership*, the Panel notes:
- The external gender evaluation was positive about the inclusion of gender issues in the 10 projects that it considered. However, in a small number of projects reviewed

by the Panel there was little evidence that gender issues had been sufficiently considered; in some cases gender seemed very much to have been an after-thought added late on in the development of the project; and

- The term partnership is used rather loosely across the different projects, with there being little evidence of a systematised approach to partnership models and structures being incorporated across PAN projects. IDRC's Donor Partnership Division has a systematic approach to partnerships with donors. Given the emphasis placed by the PAN team on partnerships, we were surprised not to find a clearly articulated and documented approach to delivering ICT4D initiatives successfully through partnerships. The team and project leaders might like to draw together their conclusions on this subject in a report that would enable their experiences to be shared and emulated more widely.

The Panel was also concerned that the Project Approval Documents frequently stated that there were no ethical issues worthy of consideration in implementing ICT4D projects. Most projects would have benefited from greater attention to the ethical dimensions of what they were seeking to do. Ethical considerations, at the very least concerning the changed balance of power that ICTs might introduce in a community, or the cultural impact that a project could cause through negative unintended consequences, should be considered. There is an in-built assumption in most project proposals that the introduction of ICTs is necessarily a good thing. This is a moral judgement. For some, ICTs might actually be bad. The key point we are making is that these proposals should at least say something on the ethical dimensions of the initiative being proposed.

2.3 Prospectus Implementation: Creative Tensions and Further Success Factors
During the review period, the PAN team grappled with three creative tensions:

- Balancing the delivery of *high quality research* and *the implementation of 'development' practices* is challenging. Supporting various activities, ranging from highly focused academic research projects to more general capacity development and networking projects, the PAN program broadly got this balance right.
- Another tension evident in the program was how it sought to balance *diversity and depth of capacity development in research*. The extent and diversity of the projects supported was impressive. While the PAN team is confident that it was able to manage this wide range of activity effectively, some concerns were expressed by interviewees about the balance between the depth and diversity of the interventions. The PAN team was aware of the difficulties in supporting too many country initiatives, and this was one reason why these were cut back during the Prospectus period. However, working with less-experienced researchers in some of the projects required considerable amounts of time, and some of our interviewees would have liked more direct assistance from the team.
- A third tension concerns the balance between supporting *established individuals*, and providing capacity development for new, *less experienced researchers*. A key reason why PAN was successful was that it often worked with known capable individual and institutional partners. This saved considerable time in partnership building, and also increased the likelihood of success, but it does give rise to challenges in attributing causes of outputs. There is nevertheless also evidence that the team took carefully

judged risks, and was able to respond to funding requests from previously unknown researchers and practitioners in the region.

Three additional factors were seen as being critical to the success of PAN:
- Influential PAN projects sought to involve policy makers in the earliest stages of activity. This helped to ensure swift conversion of research findings into policy practice, as with LIRNEasia and PANdora.
- Grantees greatly valued the opportunity to network face-to-face with those involved in other PAN projects, as in the Penang conference in 2009. The opportunity to meet people in person generated considerable interaction, and interviewees mentioned potential future collaborations that resulted from that event. This was particularly valued, because few projects reported success in mastering digital networking technologies during the implementation of their actual projects.
- Effective building of trust and respect, within the team, between the team and grantees, and with external stakeholders was critical to the success of PAN.

3. The Quality of the Research Outputs / Publications

Key findings
- Few publications reach highest levels of strictly academic quality, but on average scientific quality of publications is acceptable, fulfilling the objective set by prospectus and demonstrating a marked improvement over the previous programming cycle
- Publications typically score higher for quality indicators that go beyond measuring narrow academic excellence and include utility, readability and novelty value
- The overall mix of research strategies, topics and output formats is very conducive to meeting broader objectives of quality, influence, ownership, capacity-building, and innovation, some of which are not easy to balance and at times difficult to reconcile

In accordance with the TOR this section focuses on assessing to what extent the overall quality of the research outputs / publications can be considered acceptable, given context, intended purpose, and other relevant qualifying factors.

3.1   Our approach

The Panel's assessment is primarily based on an in-depth reading of all 40 peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs produced by PAN grantees and staff from 2006 to date as listed in Annex 3 of the PFR.[1]The Panel developed eight key indicators to assess the quality of the conceptual framework, methodology, and analysis, the novelty value, utility, citation count and readability of the research contribution, and, where applicable, the quality of the publication type. To triangulate and refine our analysis the Panel also included questions on perceived quality of research outputs and outcomes in its interviews and reviewed key outputs in the purposeful sample of more than 35 PAN projects including related project documentation such as rPCRs that contained particularly rich and useful information. The latter two strategies helped us identify additional outputs beyond publications and those mentioned in the PFR.

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[1] The Annex lists 42 publications; this however included one publication that the team could not procure in a timely fashion and one poster presentation that was not assessed.

3.2 Findings in more detail

3.2.1 Projects have produced a balanced mix of different types of publications

Research approaches range from conceptual explorations that open a conversation on under-explored issues or contextualise a specific discussion for Asia, to comparative macro-indicator analyses that help elucidate differences within and between countries in Asia. The mix also includes systematic literature reviews and case study syntheses to consolidate and condense evidence for broader consumption, as well as a substantial number of case studies. The diversity of approaches indicates a welcome openness to different ways of contributing to scientific knowledge production. The emphasis on case studies is in our view justifiable since they serve very well to produce credible, legitimate evidence with a potential to inform policy-making at a local level.

3.2.2   Overall publications are of acceptable scientific quality in a narrow academic sense, but there are few excellent contributions

Some publications exhibited weaknesses in conceptual framework, methodological rigour and analytical strength. Placing some of the contributions more firmly in the existing literature and moving beyond descriptive analysis could have helped improve their quality. However, on average, the 40 reviewed publications received a score between acceptable and good for all core academic quality criteria, an assessment that was also corroborated by the opinions of many interviewed stakeholders. These 40 publications are likely to represent the top research outputs of PAN projects, since they passed the publication mark – an assumption confirmed by both the PAN team and our review of other project materials. Against this backdrop, it is important to note that only a few of these pieces earned truly excellent marks on core academic-excellence indicators. At the same time, the achievements in strengthening academic quality are still significant and should not be underestimated, considering that the previous PAN programming period yielded very few publications in peer-reviewed journals. Our interviews also indicate an emphasis on mentoring and peer-input and review in several projects, which we believe contributed to the soundness of methods and evidence. Citation counts on *Google Scholar* as a proxy for recognition in the broader academic community averaged 5.5 with wide variations between 0 and 29 citations. Since some publications are very recent this number can be expected to increase over time, yet may not go up steeply for some contributions that are appropriately of interest to a very specialised and/or localised community.

3.2.3   Project outputs strike a good balance between striving for academic excellence and other quality criteria and research objectives

The Panel wishes to emphasize very strongly that academic excellence is only one factor to be considered in judging overall research quality. This view is also reflected in the methodology for our assessment and it is shared by many key informants who pointed out that quality for them includes 'usefulness'. PAN's publication output scores higher on these other important quality criteria with ratings for novelty, utility and readability approaching the rating 'good'. It is important to note that academic excellence and usefulness or policy influence are difficult to reconcile and often trade-off against one other; this is similar to the trade-off between academic excellence and capacity building. These multiple trade-offs were emphasized by almost all interviewed stakeholders. Given the acceptable scores on academic quality, the 'good' scores on broader quality criteria,

and the substantial achievements on other objectives described in this review the Panel concludes that PAN has managed these multiple trade-offs well and achieved a good balance in what are often competing objectives. Putting an even stronger focus on research excellence in a strictly academic sense may therefore not be desirable since it may undermine achievements on other output quality criteria and research objectives.

3.2.4 Accessibility and visibility remain important challenges

Accessibility and visibility of research outputs are preconditions for wider recognition, usefulness and sustainable policy influence. The Panel therefore welcomes IDRC's more recent requirement that its grantees give IDRC a usage license for the outputs they produce and deposit a copy of the publications in IDRC's digital library. Efforts by PAN to encourage publishing in open-access journals are also commendable. However, we also found that not all publications are available in the digital library, that the library is difficult to browse, and that it is not the most intuitive location that potential users may turn to in the first place. The Panel discovered that a sizeable portion of the key publications are behind a pay-wall and thus very difficult for researchers and other users, particularly in developing countries, to access. The Panel recommends that PAN consider a requirement for all grantees to make available on their own websites a pre-publication version for all publications, a practice that is acceptable to almost all publishers and does not preclude publication in peer-reviewed journals. Our review also indicates that PAN and its grantees are using a wide variety of other research dissemination channels, including websites, blogs (e.g. LIRNEasia, APC), Second Life and various multimedia formats. While ascertaining the efficacy of these instruments was beyond the scope of this review, the Panel welcomes this embrace of, and experimentation with, alternative dissemination channels. The synthesis articles that PAN has produced are particularly useful for academics, policymakers and practitioners, both for better contextualising findings, assembling them into further-reaching insights, and making them accessible to a broader audience. More of these are desirable and could be commissioned with scholars in partner countries as part of broader research capacity-building efforts.

3.2.5 Research portfolio reflects commendable risk-taking and innovation

PAN research activities and outputs touch upon a wide range of topics in the field of ICT4D. The overall portfolio combines a focus on the more conventional yet important (e.g. localisation, ICT in rural development, regulatory reform) with welcome attention to the more experimental, emergent and marginalised (e.g. the potential of ICTs to help give a collective voice to sex workers, the psychological effects of Internet use, wifi activism, piracy cultures). This wide range facilitates cross-fertilisation and makes it possible to pick up on emerging issues at an early stage', when the window for using evidence to frame the policy debate and achieve policy influence may be still be wide open. The Panel notes concerns about PAN spreading itself too thinly across a wide spectrum, and potential trade-offs between breadth and depth of topical focus. There are, however, also indications that PAN's programming is flexible enough to terminate avenues for research that do not live up to their promise without too much sunk investment (i.e. after a scoping exercise) and to scale up funding and go deeper where the potential is borne out. Provided this flexibility can be sustained and is effectively deployed it can justify a continuation of broad topic scope in programming and help PAN fulfill its incubation function in areas that may not be covered by more conventional research.

3.2.6 Strong markers of ideological independence and openness

Research is not value free, but PAN's research outputs demonstrate a clear and effective commitment to ideological independence and openness. The spectrum of viewpoints espoused by different research publications is broad and accommodates many different values and ideological perspectives, from a preference for free-market mechanisms to critical engagements with the potential negative side effects of ICTs. Some outputs and publications, particularly in the earlier phase of PAN, had more focus on policy influence than deep analysis. Yet, viewpoints and values in the publications reviewed do not appear to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the evidence and analysis. All this indicates that PAN deserves its reputation for independence, openness and credibility, an observation that was also shared by several key informants and that is without doubt one of the most valuable assets and key elements of success for IDRC.

3.2.7 Other outputs perceived positively by stakeholders

In the course of the review the Panel has also identified other outputs which do not lend themselves to evaluation according to our publication scoring matrix, including blogs, multimedia products and knowledge sharing events. Unfortunately, resource and time constraints did not allow the Panel to examine the quality of these additional outputs with sufficient rigour. As a result, the Panel must confine itself at this point to flagging some of these additional outputs that have been referred to in positive terms by key informants. These include a documentary movie on open source software, blogs and other multimedia products that provided additional outlets to promote and publish research, various well-received capacity-building exercises, mentorship arrangements and workshops -- in particular a major conference in Penang to bring together a large number of PAN partners, which was widely received as useful and inspired new collaborations including one between e-health and privacy grantees. Depending on one's definition of outputs one might also consider including networks and software implementations as outputs, but the Panel chose to discuss these in more detail in the outcomes section.

4. The Significance and Contribution of Outcomes

Key Findings
- The Panel can largely substantiate what PAN found as its outcomes in the PFR, with some clarifications and remaining questions
- There is a continued need for the small grants program
- Capacity-building and networks have allowed PAN to deliver its core objectives
- Gender was at the forefront of the prospectus, and later in the review it became more central, although it remains not yet fully mainstreamed
- There is concern about potential pressure to move projects away from lesser developed countries in order to find research partners most likely to generate timely and substantive outcomes.

4.1 Outcomes reported in the program final report

The PFR focuses on four outcome areas: influencing the reform of ICT policies, catalyzing ICT innovations for social benefits, capacity building in ICT, and contributing to strengthened gender integration in ICT4D. As prescribed by the TOR, the Panel assessed the significance and contributions of outcomes as presented in the PFR. The Panel sought to verify PFR outcomes through interviews with grantees, stakeholders, evaluators, and extensive document review (Annexes 1-8). The TOR requests outcomes be discussed with respect to relevance, value, and significance, and the Panel strove to maintain a sense of internal logic in relation to these concepts by asking interviewees to define these notions before discussing outcomes. Interpretations varied; most often, relevance, value and significance were identified as "usefulness" in terms of purpose and audience. It is the Panel's assessment that program outcomes are relevant, significant and valuable across three of the project areas, with more measured achievements in gender integration.

4.1.1 Outcomes related to influencing ICT policy reform
Influence on telecommunications policy reform has been one of the strongest areas of PAN outcomes, at least in terms of explicit causality, specifically from the work of LIRNEasia. Through interviews, the Ofir evaluation of LIRNEasia, and other document reviews, the Panel was clearly able to substantiate the achievements presented in the PFR about LIRNEasia's influence on the policies for Sri Lanka's mobile phone taxation scheme and Indonesia's leased Internet lines. According to many informants, however, LIRNEasia, is a special case given the organizational culture, the numbers of people devoted to working almost exclusively on policy issues, the specific policy arena in which they work, and the strong personality at the center of the group. While LIRNEasia successes are notable, the Panel urges PAN not to set LIRNEasia as a standard for outcomes, since their achievements would be difficult to replicate elsewhere.

PAN's work on intellectual property rights (IPR) suffered from difficulty finding appropriate research partners. PAN eventually worked with Consumers International on IP and World Intellectual Property Organization issues, and the Panel verifies that PAN-supported research was utilized by Mongolia and India. While the significance of these outcomes is more limited than LIRNEasia's work, PAN emphasized difficulties related to the newness of the research area in the region and diverse cultural contexts. It is reasonable to assume that the longitudinal approaches taken by PAN in the past with respect to cultivating research partners and incubating networks would eventually reap rewards in this area; given the future reorganization, it would be sensible to retain those longitudinal strategies, perhaps cross-regionally, in order to achieve policy influence.

The PFR discusses two advocacy areas that to some extent represent approaches from an earlier phase of PAN. Two longstanding relationships – with Internet activist Onno Purbo and the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) – have for some time produced valuable outcomes congruent with PAN objectives. These relationships are grounded in PAN's tradition of working with change makers regardless of their participation in traditional academic conversations.

4.1.2 Catalyzing ICT Innovations for Social Benefits

PAN successfully supported the development of technological innovations and the cultivation of a learning environment that could sustain continued technological innovation. LIRNEasia's methodology for developing an early warning system generated tangible policy outcomes, and PAN Localization has affected government adoption of standards and localization capacities. It also provided a platform for regional specialists funded by PAN to take an active role in international standards-setting initiatives such as ICANN's recent adoption of multiple character-set urls. The PFR remarks on testing of ONI's circumvention tool, Psiphon, as part of their outcomes in this area; however, experts in the area of circumvention tools pointed the Panel to a perspective on Psiphon that instead emphasized a gap between Psiphon's reputation and its actual functionality and utility on the ground, particularly in light of the increasingly sophisticated and robust field of circumvention tools.

The PFR claims that the PAN R&D and ISIF small grants competitions do not result in directly measurable social or technical impact, primarily by generalizing and interpreting an evaluation of these grants in the health field that showed disappointing results. Based on a combination of external interviews and the Panel's analysis, however, PAN and IDRC should consider the small grants program as a "high risk, high impact" program, similar to the ones that granting agencies such as the US National Science Foundation adopt for emerging, cross-disciplinary areas, where risky investments potentially generate high impact. In addition, a small grants program can help overcome some of the limitations identified in the network projects that fund smaller research subprojects (see 4.1.3.). These small grants programs are 4-5% of the overall budget, and they might productively be seen as a kind of angel investment fund moving forward. Especially in the technology field, much innovation is generated from grassroots environments that lack traditional expertise. While the networks might be seen as an appropriate substitution for a free-standing small grants program, networks are still institutions with the normalizing and flattening characteristics of all institutions. A separate small grants program would serve a different audience and function.

4.1.3 Creating Learning Environments and Capacity Building in ICT4D

Overall, the Panel's review largely parallels the sections of the PFR, but in this section it departs slightly from that organization. Specifically, the PFR discusses networks in the context *of creating a learning environment for ICT innovation*. However, based on the conclusions of the Wilson-Grau Network evaluation and discussions with the PAN team and the IDRC Evaluation Unit, the Panel addressed the substantial Networks initiatives in relationship to capacity building. There is no doubt that networks supported by PAN (L10N, PANACeA, PANdora) have a positive impact on individuals, organizations, and the region. The bodies of knowledge and expertise that reside within these networks can be pointed to as one PAN's significant achievements, one that has impact regardless of whether one classifies these as outputs or outcomes.

A considerable amount of PAN's effort has gone into the **network modality**. Overall, the networks have created relationships that generate higher quality research and scaffold relationships with policymakers. In interviews almost all grantees associated with network projects emphasized the network's role in strengthening their work by providing peer review, collaborations, and regular face-to-face meetings. However, the networks are not

without their challenges. Grantees and the PAN team alike identified several systemic issues with networks, including difficulties grouping unfamiliar colleagues onto research projects, setting shared expectations of work habits across multiple cultural contexts, and managing widely divergent capacity across a network. In addition, there were mixed experiences among grantees regarding the ease with which networks were able to replace non-productive members or add new contributors. Also, digital networks have been challenging; grantees might benefit from strategic consideration of emerging computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) research. Solving persistent online communication problems is difficult, but attention to specific communication needs of different groups may help.

Some more recent projects have tried to address weaknesses in the network approach, particularly those associated with working with established partners. For example, SIRCA appears to be a hybrid grants/network model that leverages pre-existing relationships and well-defined mentorship models and combines them with openness to new entrants provided by a grants competition. The Panel was also intrigued to hear the SIRCA model is being considered for wider implementation since our research indicates the project's strong mentoring, along with blind review and other models from traditional academic formats, is leading to the strong research publications IDRC seeks. While SIRCA seems to adopt a new approach to deal with identified issues, other recent projects appear to find it difficult to overcome known challenges. For example, in the privacy and PAN-GOV (which explores the different ways ICTs can be used for governance) networks, it appears that despite efforts to broaden the participant base, the networks may have ended up with a heavy presence of known partners with a previous track record. This pattern highlights one of the problematic incentives that the Panel identified, which favours work with known entities and more developed countries over risk-taking, since such an approach increases the likelihood of rapid, reportable outcomes. While this may be a legitimate way to ensure low risk grants management in network modalities, it also highlights the importance of a complementary, more open small grants program (see above).

Network sustainability was raised by the Wilson-Grau network evaluation, several PAN team members and grantees; in response to this evaluation, the PAN team provided new programming to make networks more sustainable, including workshops on communicating effectively with policymakers, capacity building for self-evaluation, providing structures for networks to grow organically and add productive members, and fundraising. Given the usefulness of program evaluations to direct productive changes of direction, it is surprising that most individual projects do not conduct external evaluations. The Panel supports recent moves by PAN to provide grantees with tools to conduct their own project evaluations.

PAN had also hoped to develop trans-disciplinary ICT4D methods and research tools. As acknowledged in the PFR, this objective was not met, but this is an extremely difficult area to address. PAN might have partnered strategically with others trying to accomplish similar goals. The panel encourages PAN to explore partnerships, potentially with the private sector. While traditional partnerships with industry can result in a clash of objectives, some organizations' learning arms dovetail with PAN's goals.

4.1.4 Contributing to Strengthened Gender Integration in ICT4D

The prospectus goal that all projects include a gender analysis was not substantiated from the interviews conducted with grantees and reviews of project documentation. There is wide variation in the extent to which gender was incorporated. According to interviews with experts in gender and ICT not associated with the PAN prospectus, the Gender Evaluation Methodology is well known in the larger community. Overall, it is evident that the PAN team takes gender seriously, and there was more focus on gender in later stages of implementation; however there is variation in the extent to which projects incorporate gender-based analyses.

4.2 Other Outcomes and Related Issues

As mentioned earlier, the Panel noted a shift in PAN's approach towards more emphasis on traditional notions of academic or research excellence. In the policy sphere this could result in turning focus away from individuals or organizations with useful positioning or visibility (i.e. Purbo) and more towards projects likely to have an effect through credible research results. At the same time, PAN team members emphasized that they were interested most in research that was "credible based on what their peers consider credible". This begs the question of who are the peers. The Panel encourages PAN and IDRC to consider a range of communities as users of the work they fund. Both academic and policy work can be seen as "good work." However, both can also be challenging to achieve in least developed countries (LDCs).

From interviews with PAN team members, the Panel detected concern about a potential shift towards funding activities in more developed countries in the hopes of seeing more rapid effects as a result of investment, whether through quick wins on policy influence or high quality peer reviewed academic publications. The data on funded projects is inconclusive, and it is not clear to the Panel if this is an articulated policy. While such an approach may indeed provide more visible outcomes and impressive metrics, the Panel cautions against moving away from support to lesser developed countries. Outcomes might take longer to produce, but it is crucial to find the right balance between producing outcomes and operating in places that can most benefit from research partnerships.

5. Strategic issues for the Board of Governors

Six strategic issues arise from the Panel's review.

5.1 Giving ICTs a strong presence across core areas of programming is more important for IDRC's mission and objectives than ever

Given the organizational juncture that PAN and programming on ICT4D at IDRC has reached, the Panel wishes to emphasize strongly the importance of ICT-focused research. All Panel members take a very critical scholarly perspective on the actual role and impact of ICTs, so the following remarks are not merely self-serving. ICTs have reached a level of diffusion in developing countries that shifts the opportunity curve and brings about deep transformational changes – good and bad – across key areas of development from empowerment and accountability to poverty reduction, economic opportunity, innovation and environmental sustainability. As of 2010, it is impossible to think about governance and policy influence without considering how standards of political accountability and landscapes of political contestation shift under the influence of

new media from Afghanistan to Vietnam. It is impossible to research and support empowerment and poverty reduction without appraising the role of mobile phones or networked forms of collective action. It is impossible to unearth the conditions for stimulating innovation and successful research on key problems in development without tracing and appraising the seismic shifts towards open publishing, open innovation ecologies, and collaborative knowledge-building that new ICT tools and applications continue to drive. As a consequence, building a strong ICT component into IDRC's other programming areas is essential and offers opportunities for insights and innovations in view of empowering through knowledge. Mainstreaming ICT4D can also offer opportunities to bring in new partners and break down some persistent communication silos across program areas. The Panel's analysis indicates that PAN made great strides in this regard, but more can and must be done to expand and diversify the pool of partners that it works with.

5.2 Retaining a strong ICT competence hub is essential for innovation and cross-pollination

An important caveat applies to this mainstreaming approach: in our view it is impossible to nurture a vibrant, innovative ICT knowledge base for development without bringing dispersed streams of experience with ICT in different programming areas back together. Comparing, synthesizing and leveraging what has been learnt and is being done with ICT across thematic areas is essential for cross-pollination and leveraging evidence for continuing innovation. At the same time, many important ICT policy issues such as privacy, censorship, or digital intellectual property rights have implications across different application areas but merit a consolidated research approach. Only such a hub and spoke architecture and strong linkages among components will allow IDRC to stay on top of what ICT contributes to development research and impact. Our interviews and analysis of research outputs demonstrate very clearly that IDRC has developed real expertise in ICT4D and established a formidable reputation as a trusted knowledge partner in this area. It would be unfortunate if mainstreaming ICT means this expertise and reputation is eroded or results in ICT becoming an afterthought in other projects, a real risk given the experience with gender-mainstreaming in many organizations.

5.3 Cross-regional programming provides a fertile ground for fresh comparative perspectives – yet this should not detract from much needed focus on LDCs and marginalized communities

Cross-regional collaboration has already led PAN to embark on important comparative work with BRIC countries. Yet, these new opportunities, which many other organizations have also begun to exploit, should not detract IDRC from retaining a strong focus on the least developed countries and most marginalized communities. Building empowerment through knowledge might face the greatest challenges in such environments, yet it also offers the greatest rewards and value for these communities. Our analysis has found a number of formidable PAN research projects that embody this spirit and laudably tread where few others dare. Yet, we also discerned some more recent dynamics in the broader programming environment that may distract from such a focus. Pressure to produce and demonstrate quick wins may further amplify this challenge to retain a focus where IDRC's impact could be most needed and eventually add most value.

5.4 The range of viewpoints reflected in PAN's portfolio is commendable and a key asset for IDRC's reputation of independence and openness

PAN's programming accommodates a remarkable diversity of ideological viewpoints, from free market supporters to critical scholarship on globalization and gender. This diversity is an essential driver of IDRC's reputation for independence, and many stakeholders highlighted this in their perceptions of PAN's work. Enabling such a spectrum of viewpoints and open spaces for experimentation through small grant programs could serve as a model for broader IDRC programming strategies.

5.5 The role of the private sector could be considered more strategically

At the moment PAN seems to view private sector actors mainly as funding partners. The program might benefit from a broader, more strategic and creative appraisal of business as a potential target audience for policy influence, a potential ally in advocating on specific policy issues, and as a source for and collaborator in producing empirical evidence, developing innovations, training and capacity-building.

5.6 Demand-driven research could be taken a step further

Setting locally-driven research agendas is a key pillar of IDRC's mission, and involving policymakers in the design of research has been pointed out by some PAN team members and grantees as essential for relevant research and policy influence. Yet, PAN and perhaps other IDRC programs might also want to explore other demand-oriented arrangements for research. The model of research helpdesks might be worth considering. The home institution of one of the reviewers, for example, operates a very successful research helpdesk in the area of governance and development policy for international aid donors. This helpdesk responds to queries with a guaranteed turn-around time and provides an effective way to get sound research findings to policy makers and potentially other stakeholders when and where they need it, thereby maximizing the potential for policy influence. Helpdesks also provide an interesting vehicle to cultivate relationships with policymakers, serve as detectors for emerging demands, and potentially contribute to the sustainability of research outfits in the longer term, if service funding through beneficiaries can be secured. It might be worth exploring the possibility for established IDRC partners, networks or even IDRC program teams to adopt such a helpdesk model in specific areas of competence and for specific target audiences in the policy community.

6. Conclusions

The Panel's review of the PAN program is largely positive. The prospectus was implemented in a coherent and appropriate manner. The outputs are numerous and, while they range in quality, they reflect a varied grant making focus and the effective mix of research and advocacy activities that PAN has fostered. The outcomes have been significant, and they have reflected traditional research and policy programs, vibrant and wide-ranging networks and the more risk-taking PAN funding streams. Our review has balanced evidence from multiple sources while facing time and resource constraints; more detail on these constraints are discussed in Annex 14.

There are significant challenges in balancing the tensions of research and development, but the PAN team is generally thoughtful and careful in grappling with these tensions. As

IDRC moves forward with programming that includes technology and society issues, we encourage an approach that considers the unique aspects of ICTs as a component of the development landscape. Cross-fertilization across domains has contributed to PAN's success, and it is imperative that integrating programming such as PAN's into verticals does not lose the richness of cross-domain exchanges. ICT innovation occurs according to somewhat distinct processes; development programming around ICTs tends to reflect those distinct processes. It is the Panel's hope as PAN-related projects shift to new communities within IDRC that the unique culture that has incubated ICT innovation and ICTs in development practice will also find new communities and colleagues within the organization.