



**Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development:
An institutional evaluation**

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Executive Summary

This document offers an evaluative study of the work of Rimisp, formerly the "International Farming Systems Research and Methodology Network," now the "Latin American Center for Rural Development." The evaluation was conducted at Rimisp's own request and with Rimisp resources, to be used as input into the organization's strategic thinking regarding the next several years of the organisation's work. The purpose of the evaluation was to address questions of relevance, effectiveness, quality, efficiency, outcomes and sustainability. Rimisp's overall niche as well as its actual and potential contributions in Latin America were also addressed in the evaluation.

The study was carried out on a periodic basis from January through to July 2006. The main research method used were in-depth, open ended interviews, combined with e-mail interviews, a short closed question electronic survey and document review. Interviews were conducted in Chile, Argentina, Peru, El Salvador and Costa Rica, as well as by telephone, with a total of sixty-nine people; sixteen open-ended questionnaires were sent to deliberately targeted interviewees, with twelve replies received. Closed questionnaires were sent to a random sample of thirty-one *socios*¹ – eleven replies were received.

History and evolution of Rimisp

Rimisp began in 1986 as a network of IDRC-supported farming systems projects throughout Latin America. Rimisp subsequently became a legally constituted organization and when IDRC funding ended, the balance between its existence as a network and as a self-governing organization began to shift. Since then, Rimisp has functioned progressively less as a network and more as an independent organization without, however, ever losing its commitment to networking as a way of working, building capacities and recruiting core partners and allies. In this sense, after 20 years of existence Rimisp is still marked by its origins.

Since 1994, when initial IDRC funding abruptly ended, Rimisp steadily diversified its sources of financial support. After a temporary reduction in size, diversification has been accompanied by steady (and since 2002, more rapid) growth. Principal financial partners now include IDRC (the relationship began again in 1997), IFAD, ICCO, Ford Foundation, New Zealand Aid, DfID and various bodies within the Chilean Government. Since 2001/2, the number of principal investigators has increased from three to seven, large projects from four to eight, and the value of active projects from approximately US\$3.5 million to approximately US\$6 million, though this amount varies from year to year.

This period of growth has also seen a change in the emphasis of Rimisp's work. The early emphasis on methodology (farming systems research methods, in particular) has declined significantly, and been replaced with a growing emphasis on building learning capacity in rural

¹ The report uses the Spanish term *socios* to refer to those organizations and individuals that Rimisp works with more closely. The term captures the sense of "associates" (some of whom may be partners) but is preferable to the term "partner" as not all these relationships are helpfully understood as partnerships.

development and coordinating and conducting applied research on different dimensions of rural development. Rimisp now characterizes its institutional goal and strategies as follows: "to promote organizational learning and innovation in public and private projects, programs and policies in order to promote inclusion, equity, well being and democratic development and Latin American rural societies."

Given this evolution, Rimisp appears to be an organization that first aimed to support learning processes, and then over time has combined learning support with research support and a limited amount of in-house research. The breadth of activities has lead observers to view Rimisp in quite different ways – some see it as a development NGO, some as an organization that funds development, and others see it as a research centre and “think-tank”. Rimisp is a hybrid institution. This also reflects funder preferences and aversions. Donor’s appreciate Rimisp's ability to bring in resources that are then channeled to other organizations that actually carry out the research. Rimisp then advises and coordinates the other organization. Rimisp’s role is regarded as by donors as an asset, which makes Rimisp attractive as a vehicle for channeling significant resources for research capacity building. Conversely, donors' relative aversion to supporting research (at least without a strong capacity building element) also limits the research that Rimisp can do directly. That said, Rimisp has done better than many centres in terms of generating resources for research.

While its rapid growth could have upset the coherence of Rimisp's portfolio of activities, in practice the projects are held together by three overlapping, broad, generative concepts (each with a positive and a normative dimension). These are: learning network (the longest standing of the three) territorially based rural development, and pro-poor market deepening. These three concepts have emerged over time and reflect both Rimisp's cumulative learning and the arrival of new staff.

- *Learning networks* are what Rimisp aims to build – the concept describes what the projects foster. Rimisp values learning networks in the context of understanding rural development partly as an extension and deepening of communities of learning throughout Latin America.
- The concept of *territorially based rural development* is codified in the enormously successful document on Territorially Based Rural Development, or DTR (Schejtman and Berdegúé, 2003), and a large part of Rimisp's portfolio has become terrain for testing, elaborating and disseminating this view of rural development.
- *Market deepening* reflects Rimisp's belief that poverty tends to be a result of insufficient rather than too much market development. Also central is Rimisp’s commitment to new markets that need to be governed so that they are inclusive and accessible to the poor. Rimisp's sensitivity to market-derived processes of change in Latin America has led it to pick up on certain transformations and trends (non-agricultural employment, the supermarketization of food chains) either earlier or, in the eyes of many observers, in more interesting ways than other analysts.

With these core concepts, Rimisp's overall work program draws on *analytical* traditions originating both within social democracy and neoliberalism. As such, Rimisp is located within the family of projects that are broadly considered "Third Way" and post-Washington Consensus,

that seek poverty reduction within broader "renewal of social democracy" for rural development in Latin America.

While these three generative concepts underlie Rimisp's work, internal organisation continues to be more project-based as opposed to being by learning areas or programs. The current structure is not yet positioned to capitalize on activities as a basis for producing knowledge in ways that synthesize and analyze across projects and across scales of engagement in Latin America.

Rimisp's products: quality, relevance and impact

It is possible to distinguish two levels of products in Rimisp. Firstly, those produced within, and in large measure by, Rimisp's projects; and secondly, the products of Rimisp as an institution. The study focused on six project areas.

Project products

The quality and relevance of Rimisp's two longest standing projects – *Fidamerica* and the *Grupo Chorlavi* – is almost immediately apparent from the number of times these projects have been renewed. *Fidamerica* is now beginning its fourth phase, and *Chorlavi* is in its third phase. In each case, the projects have produced instruments and provided support to help networks of rural development organizations engage in learning activities. In each instance learning has clearly occurred among these organizations, as well as within the funding agency. Indeed, each funding agency has upheld these projects as models of how learning networks ought to be organized and to function. In each case, the learning seems to have been most relevant for, and to have mostly occurred among, technical project staff and organizations, though a wider community also participates in and benefits from the electronic conferences and project publications. In neither instance is there much evidence that the learning occurring within the networks has moved to a higher scale in terms of influencing policy. Nor has this learning occurred to any significant extent among rural people's organizations and movements.

Regoverning Markets and *Territorios rurales en movimiento (TREM)* are the most research oriented of Rimisp's large projects. *Regoverning markets* constitutes an area of work on rural economies and market restructuring that includes non-farm rural employment, the effects of supermarket supply chains for rural production options, and now more generally the implications of recent changes in a range of commodity markets to enable small scale producers to access markets. The scope of current work – which is global in reach and scale and is conducted through an international consortium – largely reflects the success of earlier work. Rimisp's research on supermarkets and non-farm employment are widely recognized - above all in the international, donor and research communities – as having been formative contributions that anticipated (in the supermarkets case above all) emerging themes and so helped establish research agendas. The international quality of the work is reflected in its funding sources, the reach of its partnerships, and publications in peer-reviewed, international journals. *TREM* brought Rimisp and IDRC into unfamiliar research terrain – the role of social movements in fashioning institutions of governance and patterns of rural development. It has been a more complicated project and has suffered from: the two main partners' relative unfamiliarity with the theme; the

workload of the initial coordinator; and the series of changes that have occurred over the course of the project.

The final two areas of work – a project to elaborate a proposal for a rural development strategy for Argentina, and the a number of evaluation and systematization contracts for different departments of the Chilean government – are cases in which Rimisp has sought to take the concept of Territorially Based Rural Development (DTR) and make it relevant, indeed central, to government thinking on rural policy. Each has, like TREM, delivered some highly valued products and some products with limitations. The two areas of work demonstrate Rimisp's ability to work directly with national and regional governments in Latin America and to deliver products that are useful to these partners and clients. In each instance, however, there have been moments at which the pressure of work within Rimisp, its physical distance from some of the debates and conflicts surrounding the theme on which Rimisp was working, as well as in-country dynamics over which it had no control, have compromised product quality. Also there has been a tendency – at certain moments – for work to be over influenced by the concept of DTR leading to documents that appear to be more deductive (from concept to policy) than inductive (from regional dynamics to policy).

Institutional products

First, Rimisp has produced a set of methodological products – in particular for the systematization and evaluation of rural policy instruments – that have given it an important competitive edge for consultancy, particularly within Chile. These products have both grown out of, and have fed back into Rimisp's projects, and reflect an important institutional contribution to the rural development community in Latin America.

Second, Rimisp has – through lessons accumulated within its projects – developed systems for the management of complex, multi-actor, international projects. These systems – which combine networked learning, electronic and real time conferences, open competitive (or closed-system competitive) funds and learning exchanges – are very highly valued by Rimisp's donors, but also by its partners who have found them to be vehicles for connecting with other organizations in the region.

Third, Rimisp has delivered a series of intellectual products that go beyond its projects. In some cases these products take the form of turning project outputs into more internationally available journal articles; in others, they are stand alone publications that are circulated electronically in order to influence policy debate. The products derive from Rimisp's privileged position – made possible by its products – to synthesize lessons. Some of these products have been very highly valued (most recently and importantly the document on DTR), while others have been deemed useful but not cutting edge.

The Rimisp model

Rimisp's mode of operation is central to how it sustains the quality and impact of its work, as well as to its own sustainability as an organization. Five dimensions of this mode of operation are identified.

First, Rimisp is a *social capital dense* institution. That is, it invests heavily in relationships. While these relationships make claims on Rimisp, in net terms they deliver a collective subsidy to the work of Rimisp that at the same time greatly increases both its reach and the quality of work. Rimisp invests in these relations in several ways. Communication, interaction and travel are taken very seriously and conducted collegially. Partners are involved in project development and framing. Also, Rimisp channels approximately 69 percent of its total work and administrative budget to others. This generates respect and legitimacy for Rimisp, and creates incentives for others to work with them.

Second, and closely related, Rimisp is a *mix between an organization and a network* and to some degree keeps the boundary between the two porous and blurred. Thus, almost all of Rimisp's work is done through networks of some sort. Rimisp enrolls partners with whom it wants to collaborate within its network and thus also enrolls their networks and gains legitimacy. At the same time, core Rimisp staff often take something of a back seat and so when Rimisp acts the public face of this action is often another organization or researcher. However, in other spheres, and above all in terms of its relationship with funding agencies, Rimisp acts directly. It has been successful in turning funding relationships into ones of deep respect, and mutual benefit. These deepened relationships have in turn proven to be channels not only for subsequent funding but more importantly for policy influence. Rimisp exercises policy influence primarily through shorter, more direct contacts with policy makers and framers more than it does through its contacts with third parties who themselves influence policy.

Third Rimisp has consciously (and unconsciously) molded a particular organizational culture. Repeatedly observers refer to Rimisp as professional, transparent and honest. Furthermore, these qualities are consciously managed and developed within Rimisp. This has created a culture that is an asset and Rimisp is considered to be a model for NGO "good governance" that is valued most highly by funding agencies. Other dimensions of organizational culture have not been consciously produced. First of all, some consider Rimisp to have been influenced by the Chilean experience of rural development and feel that this reduces the relevance of some of their work in other parts of the region. Others note a gender imbalance within Rimisp's work team, and a dominant culture that focuses on interactions amongst men. In addition to any inherent inequalities that this may imply, it also reflects a wider cultural dimension embodied in the research foci of the principal researchers. Research foci have not dealt significantly with questions of difference, power and conflict and hence Rimisp has a research culture in which these themes surface far less than others. Internally there is also a sense of significant distance between the research and administrative staff.

Fourth, Rimisp's administrative and financial model consciously minimizes costs and maximizes revenue, necessary because Rimisp has neither institutional nor endowment funding. Administration is very lean, and staff work exceptionally hard to maximize revenue, principal investigators (PIs) generating between three and ten times their salary and overhead costs. This is necessary to support both Rimisp and the large turnover within the organization, and to supplement salaries. However, it also leads to work overloads and in 2005 led to several instances in which the quality of projects and the stability of Rimisp's brand came into question when PIs were unable to give projects the time they required.

Conclusions

Rimisp is a respected, trusted and extremely competent organization with which a wide range of actors *want* to cooperate, that funding agencies consider a model partner, and that many within the community of international agricultural and rural development deem to be a leading player. This legitimacy comes not from being a "civil society" organization – instead it comes from performance. Repeatedly in interviews for this study, Rimisp was lauded for its transparency, honesty, professionalism, efficiency and unaligned independence.

While Rimisp has many links with Latin American rural society, it is not embedded in a particular segment of society. This gives it independence and balance, though also a certain detachment, particularly from local (grassroots) organizations and social movements that some other partners feel slightly less comfortable about. Independence does not mean Rimisp does not stand for anything, however, and its broad role is within that set of actors in Latin America concerned with modernizing social democratic approaches (in Rimisp's case, approaches towards rural development) and to inject more sensitivity as to the place of market deepening and broadening in any project concerned with social inclusion.

In playing this role Rimisp moves between more localized rural development actors, governments and international organizations, allowing interplay between the ideas of these different actors. This defines a second important role and specific contribution for Rimisp: to help deepen conversations such as these, conversations that might otherwise not happen. And third, Rimisp lobbied the agenda that it and its partners are working on to influence policy debates and statements, primarily through the so-called "short route" to policy influence.

In playing these roles, some compare Rimisp to think-tanks in North America and Europe, yet Rimisp is not yet a think-tank for four reasons: far more of Rimisp's project and staff portfolio is oriented to helping others to think, rather than doing the thinking internally; Rimisp has no institutional resources to give it the space necessary to think, and funding partners have not helped in this regard; third, Rimisp has no established mechanism (apart from a website) to communicate its thinking; and, Rimisp's staff composition is not that of a think-tank. The think-tank comparison is also inappropriate because Rimisp is not a self-contained organization, but rather benefits from the blurry boundary between Rimisp as the core organization and Rimisp understood as a bundle of networks through which a broader collective Rimisp operates. Anchoring and contributing to this collective has been another role of Rimisp the organization.

A final role has been to give like-minded funding agencies an instrument through which to act regionally in Latin America. In this respect, Rimisp has no clear competitor in the region. At the same time it has deepened these relationships, gained the trust of funding agencies and in the process contributed to their thinking (more in some cases than others, of course). Yet funding agencies have not reciprocated by investing in Rimisp as an institution. The tendency has been to use Rimisp as a vehicle for project implementation and a source of ideas, without supporting Rimisp's core capacities in developing ideas. In some ways funding agencies are free riding on Rimisp.

Recommendations

Rather than seek to become a think-tank, Rimisp should retain its current spread (from research capacity building through to research) as this spread of activities and partners is one of its greatest assets. This spread allows Rimisp to link between research and practice, to work with both local civil society actors and international financial institutions, to support capacity building as well as generate knowledge. Think-tank models could easily draw Rimisp away from these strengths. However, Rimisp should increase its research capacities over the coming years. This would allow it to make more sustained contributions to rural development debates, to make clearer which particular debates it wants most to contribute to, and to broaden its international visibility.

Growing this research arm could be done through the following means: recruiting a small number of new PIs to work on distinct but complementary themes; making the programmatic base of its work clearer, and in this way organizing itself around the debates to which it wants to contribute rather than around projects; enhancing its communication strategy; and experimenting with ways of bringing in more visiting researchers; and finding the resources required for its own staff to write more. Such growth will require resources, and this is an area that Rimisp ought to discuss with its funding partners.

In this growth process, Rimisp should also engage with new themes. This is important in order to protect the image of independence so that Rimisp is not seen as being overly committed to the idea of market deepening. Otherwise, the result could be less than felicitous interpretations of the nature of Rimisp and its commitments. Indeed, engagement with new themes would locate Rimisp more clearly within the wider project for Latin America of which it already considers itself to be a part. Without overly specifying potential new themes, as a whole they should open up Rimisp's own reflections on power, conflict and difference within rural development. In this sense, the recent steps towards engaging the theme of social movements as a topic should be sustained (despite current temptation to step back from the topic, this would be unfortunate); the gendered nature of rural development is another area that Rimisp would do well to engage in more fully.

Rimisp already has a wide range of partners, and sustaining these partnerships has a cost. Hence broadening partnerships should be approached with caution. However, in opening up new areas of work such as these, Rimisp would necessarily open new conversations – with partners who have more expertise in (and real world operation within) the themes of: power, difference, gender and social movement. This would be a sensible and important contribution to Rimisp.

In wanting to be a regional organization, Rimisp will also have to rethink the ways in which it organizes itself and its work geographically. In particular it needs to strengthen its presence in Central America, in order to learn from and contribute to debates there. This would be best achieved through some form of strategic partnership. Rimisp ought also to open up its work in Chile, though as an object of research rather than evaluation and by focusing on territorial dynamics.

Finally, Rimisp continues to be closely identified with Julio Berdegué. 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.