

## **Strengthening Canada-Africa ties through research and innovation**

With a mandate to spur research and innovation in low- and middle-income countries, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) dedicates more than half of its budget to Africa, a youthful continent growing in economic and geopolitical relevance but also facing deep development issues.

In this context, **the ability to innovate, adapt, and generate solutions is critical.**

IDRC strengthens research capacity across Africa and leverages science and innovation to meet development challenges. Investments in science systems spur long-term innovation and resilience, from health care, to trade, to artificial intelligence. Research on public services is supporting African policy makers' ability to optimize limited resources. Harnessed for these purposes, research not only advances sustainable development in Africa but also builds a stronger future partner for Canada.

Informed by a history of working directly with African partners, IDRC offers the Committee three recommendations to strengthen Canada's partnerships with Africa in the long term:

1. Center local knowledge to address Africa's challenges.
2. Build Africa's capacity for innovation.
3. Leverage research for policy impact.

### **The value of local knowledge for context-specific solutions**

IDRC believes that those closest to a challenge are best placed to find innovative solutions. Lessons learned in one context cannot be automatically applied to another and technical expertise is made stronger when informed by experiences of affected communities and Indigenous knowledge.

For example, given that Africa is poised to be one of the regions that is most negatively impacted by severe weather events, detailed assessments of climate-change risks and responses are urgently needed to guide decisions across the continent. Much of the evidence on the impact of climate change in Africa remains outside of peer-reviewed journals and has therefore not been used to support global assessments, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). With IDRC's support, this local evidence was synthesized and included in the IPCC's 6th Assessment Report, representing the strongest African evidence in an IPCC Assessment Report to date. By providing a more comprehensive understanding of climate change impacts and response options, rooted in African context and expertise, this report will

enable African policymakers to make more targeted, ambitious, and effective decisions in climate-proofing their economies and in related areas like pandemic preparedness.

Canada must seek out and support African expertise as the foundation to the future of the Canada-Africa relationship. From development to trade, we must work in partnership with local experts and communities to avoid importing approaches designed for other contexts.

### **Investments in strong future innovation capacity**

Strong African institutions and individual talent lay the foundation for innovation. By strengthening African science systems and research centres, and by investing in individual capacities, Canada, through IDRC, is helping to enable an innovative and resilient Africa.

These capacity investments have knock-on impacts in several sectors – health, food security, governance – but are especially important in emerging fields like Artificial Intelligence (AI).

IDRC is taking a long-term, systems approach to strengthening the capacity for the responsible use of AI in Africa to tackle development challenges, while mitigating the risks of this emerging technology. Working at the system level at a large scale is made possible by strong cooperation with other funders, both to leverage and stretch Canada's investments through funding partnerships with countries like the UK and Sweden, and to coordinate across the efforts of other funders to help us achieve more.

A key part of this approach is support for AI for Development labs in Tanzania, Ghana, and Burkina Faso – designed to create centres of AI expertise while developing and nurturing local talent. These labs respond to the knowledge requirements of the public and private sectors to help drive innovation for public good. For instance, the lab in Burkina Faso is working to fill an important gap in AI resources available in Francophone Africa. Strengthening AI capacities through these labs is leading to innovative results, like an AI-powered app adopted by Kenya's hospital system that triages questions from pregnant women and mothers, using healthcare providers' time more efficiently, thus improving pregnancy outcomes.

As Canada considers how its relationship with Africa will grow and change in the future, investments in the foundations for future innovation are a key consideration. The investments described above are not only meeting acute needs but aiming to stimulate economic development in the long term, in turn contributing to a stronger potential for trade, including with Canada.

## **Research with policy impact**

IDRC supports localized, applied, and impact-driven research. By ensuring that research is designed with policy change and action in mind, decision-makers, civil society, and the private sector all get the evidence they need to implement policy for positive change at scale. This includes research that aims to ensure the inclusive implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, for example.

Another important objective of this research is to support cost-effective public investment decisions. In contexts with limited resources, governments must stretch their budgets by making choices based on evidence. In Ethiopia for example, IDRC partners tested a community-based childcare model – one that enhances early childhood development while empowering women to find stable and lucrative employment in communities without formal daycare centres. This research is now informing the city of Addis Ababa as it plans to open 1,000 childcare centres over the next three years, enhancing early childhood education and increasing women’s economic participation.

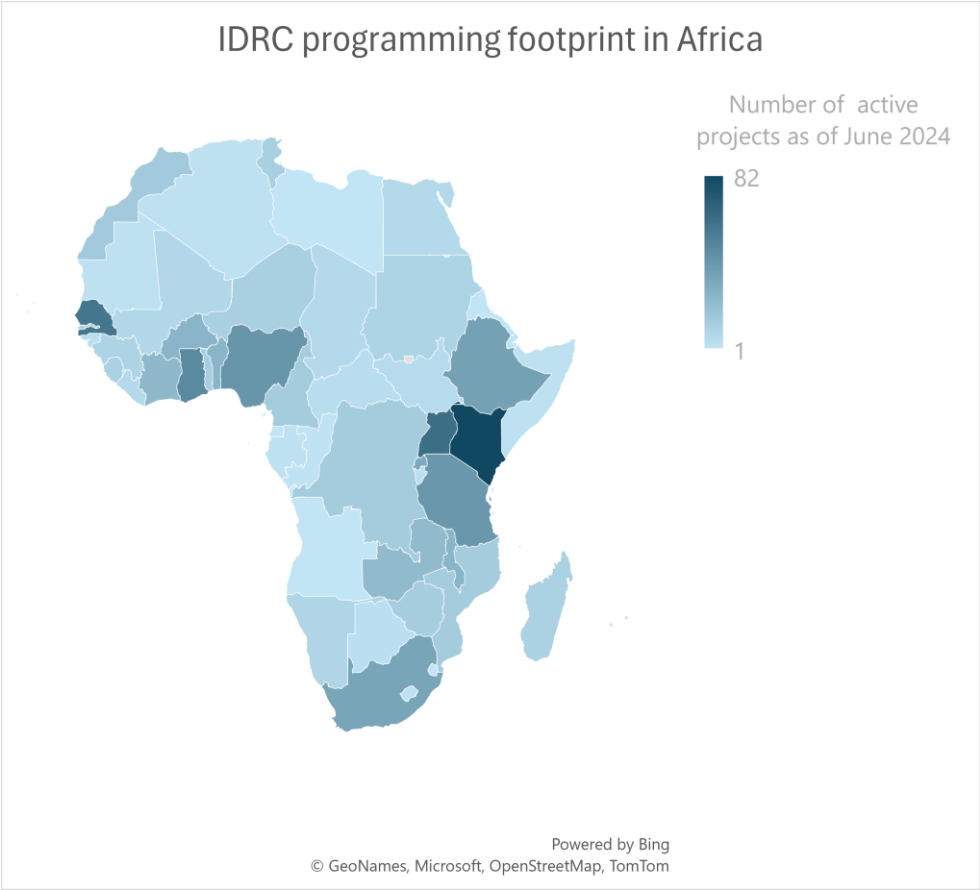
As Canada considers the future of its development relationship with Africa, drawing on evidence can help to scale up approaches that work. Policy-relevant research grounded in African expertise can also inform Canada’s approach to engaging the continent across trade and foreign affairs, including cross-border challenges like migration and security issues. Canada-Africa research collaboration that tackles global challenges can build more robust relationships that contribute to stronger linkages and goodwill between institutions and individuals.

## **Conclusion**

From working alongside diverse African partner institutions in all regions of the continent, IDRC builds deep networks of experts and leaders with ties to Canada. Canada can tap into these networks in high-growth and innovative fields like AI to turn people-to-people links into greater economic and diplomatic cooperation. Through partnerships with Canada’s federal research granting councils, IDRC facilitates many of these links already, enhancing the sharing of knowledge between Canada and Africa.

Canada’s investments in research and innovation are critical to supporting advancements for the future of Africa and can pay long-term dividends for Canada. By supporting local knowledge, strengthening capacities, and advancing research with real-world impact, Canada is making smart investments in a strong relationship with this growing continent.

**Annex: IDRC programming footprint in Africa**



*Figure 1: Concentration of active IDRC projects with research impact in countries across Africa.*