

IN MEMORIAM



Geoff Oldham
1929-2017

Professor Geoffrey Oldham was a true pioneer and international leader in science and technology for international development. He passed away on September 30. IDRC and Canada were enduring parts of his life.

In 1966, Geoff co-founded the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex. The institution was a global first, pioneering and advancing thought and empirical evidence linking the potential of science and technology to enabling policies, fiscal, educational, industrial, institutional, social or political.

At a United Nations conference in 1969, Geoff and [Maurice Strong](#), the first CIDA president, met for the first time. Geoff shared with Maurice his conclusion that the ruling dimension in development thinking and practice of transferring scientific knowledge and technologies from advanced to developing countries was seriously flawed. Such transfer might help but could never confer sustained developmental benefits. For that to happen, countries would need to establish, develop, nurture and advance their own (endogenous) capabilities in science and technology.

That conversation was the eureka moment that, with Maurice Strong's backing and political acumen, would lead to the birth of IDRC, a very different Crown Corporation, financed by Canada and governed by a board where both Canadians and nationals from developing regions had a mandate to catalyze endogenous science and technology capacity in developing countries.

Maurice recruited Geoff from SPRU to work with a small group on the architecture of the new 'Crown', including the drafting of the legislation that in 1971, with all party support in parliament, established the International Development Research Centre.

This furthered Geoff's bond with Canada that went back to his MSc and PhD studies in geophysics at the University of Toronto under Professor [John Tuzo Wilson](#), acclaimed for his contributions to advanced theories of geophysics and geology.

Following completion of his doctorate and extensive travels in Latin America, Geoff became seized by a new global focus on what came to be termed 'international development' with new initiatives and new institutions to bring poorer nations the benefits of economic and social well-being enjoyed in 'advanced economies'. This quickly became the ruling dimension of his professional and personal life. In seeking to understand development, he became fascinated by the question of how China, arguably first in the world in 1400, had become one of the world's weakest countries by 1900. He

wondered if China, then a closed, isolated and largely poor agricultural country could return to its past glories.

Geoff used a fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs and moved to Hong Kong to study Mandarin and the history and state of science and technology in several Asian countries. That experience led Geoff to understand that the development potential of nations required mobilizing to master the power of science and technology and that this, in turn, required enlightened and informed policy frameworks at all levels; national, regional municipal, within and between firms.

From that experience Geoff imagined and eventually implemented the Science and Technology Policy Programme within the Social Sciences Division of the IDRC. Geoff was the Associate Director of the STP Programme from 1970 to 1980, splitting his time with his Deputy Directorships at SPRU.

Geoff returned to the Centre as my Science Advisor from 1992 to 1996. He took up the cause of the serious gender imbalance in Science and Technology and became a trusted member of the UN advisory group that guided and helped organize the [North and Latin America Gender Summit](#). He was a member of the [Gender Advisory Committee to the Academy of Sciences of the Developing World](#).

Geoff continued his connections with Canada as a member of the Council of Canadian Academies' [Expert Panel on Women in University Research](#) .

Geoff was Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) and in 2006 he received an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from York University.

It is a virtual certainty that there would never have been an IDRC without Geoff Oldham. His vision, constancy, guidance and commitment for three decades have been central to its success.

Keith Bezanson
October 2, 2017

For more of Geoff's days as a 'China Watcher': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRQnL2IWCXk>.