

iPOLITICS

Canada's NGOs aren't looking for charity, Mr. Fantino

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In recent days, media coverage of statements by Minister of International Cooperation Julian Fantino might have left the Canadian public with the impression that NGOs are dependent and self-serving organizations that “think that CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency) only exists to keep (them) afloat” — to use the minister's own words.

This is an inaccurate portrayal of a dynamic sector that, over past decades, has benefitted from the support of hundreds of thousands of Canadians. And for good reason — the work of NGOs in developing countries reflects the value that Canadians place on addressing global poverty and related issues.

A poll conducted last March by Vision Critical found that the majority of Canadians believe that reducing global poverty will have impacts in other areas, including fulfilling human rights obligations, improving Canada's international reputation, reducing global conflict and reducing the risks of pandemics.

In Canada, there are more than 800 charitable organizations and NGOs dedicated to international development work. These organizations employ more than 8,500 full time professionals in Canada. They mobilize tens of thousands of volunteers and interns in Canada and overseas, where engaged Canadians provide technical support to development partners.

Canadian NGOs work in more than 140 developing countries around the world, implementing long-term development programs with local partners and providing humanitarian assistance.

These organizations are strongly supported by Canadians of all walks of life, through volunteering, public engagement, donations and more. In fact, Canadians contribute more than one billion dollars a year to registered charities working in international development — almost three times more than the same organizations receive from CIDA.

NGOs also receive about \$180 million per year from private foundations and about \$40 million from municipal and provincial governments. In 2010/11 CIDA contributed approximately \$525 million to Canadian NGOs (excluding universities, colleges and specialized institutes), or just under 16 per cent of all CIDA program funding. And much like CIDA's support to other sectors, this funding is essential for leveraging additional support from the Canadian public and other donors, for even greater impact and results.

NGOs are staffed by professional, passionate and dedicated agents of social change. Diverse in size and scope, they are often more nimble than other international development agencies, allowing better responses to changing contexts. They are self-critical and retrospective; they learn from their mistakes when things go wrong, as they will in complex situations.

They take transparency and accountability very seriously. Most organizations are subject to rigorous evaluations and audits from CIDA and other donors, and have sophisticated systems of accountability and transparency for both their supporters and partners.

At the Canadian Council for International Co-operation — a national platform for international development groups — we require that our members comply with CCIC's code of ethics and operational standards, one of the first and most robust codes for development NGOs globally. Canadian NGOs have contributed to building an international reputation for Canada as innovative, effective and ahead of the curve in its support for some of the poorest and most marginalized communities globally. NGOs have championed gender equity around the world and have been at the forefront of peacekeeping and human rights initiatives.

They have developed expertise in critical areas such as food security, cooperative development, micro-finance, health, education, good governance and vocational training.

Canadian NGOs are present in conflict zones, providing much-needed support to refugees and internally displaced populations. They have gone to the aid of countries devastated by natural and man-made disasters. Perhaps most significantly, they have collaborated with civil society groups worldwide in advocating for transformative change, democracy, respect for civil and economic rights, and an end to injustice and war.

Canadian taxpayers have invested over the years in developing and strengthening the capacity of a wide range of NGOs in Canada, which in turn have delivered results and demonstrated value-added on the ground.

As we all adjust to the changing realities of the global aid and development context, NGOs will require the continued and sustained support of the Canadian public and our government. Canadian NGOs have been and will continue to be key partners in a successful Canadian international development program.