

Partnerships with Canadians
A Renewal of the Mandate of Canadian Partnership Branch
A Review by the Canadian Council for International Co-operation

Summary

The Minister for International Cooperation has completed a year-long review of the mandate of Canadian Partnership Branch (CPB), culminating in a July 22nd announcement that CIDA is launching a new "Partnerships with Canadians". CIDA did not undertake any public consultations to seek out the views of CCIC and its members during this review. In this Initiative, the Minister intends to structure "a new approach to engage Canadians and organizations in international development". The promise is to "streamline the application process and reduce the administrative burden for project applications" to ensure effective and measurable results on the ground.

While the review was urgently needed and the intent of the Initiative will be welcomed by many Canadian CSOs, the specific directions as set out in the Minister's announcement leave many questions unanswered. There are concerns about the focus and scale of CIDA's support for Global Citizenship, about the restrictions to CIDA-determined countries of focus and sectoral themes, about the seemingly arbitrary principles to guide CIDA's support for effective development by CSOs, and the potentially partisan directive that programs must be consistent with Canadian foreign policy.

Canadian CSOs have recently experienced mixed and often-changing interpretations of Agency policies, highly bureaucratic and intrusive procedures, and long unpredictable delays in approval mechanisms for institutional program and project agreements. Unfortunately, without further clarification, the policy directions laid out in the Minister's announcement may accentuate the retreat from principles of responsiveness and respect for CSOs as development actors in their own right. The latter principles have been the foundation and 40-year legacy of CPB's commitment to strengthen the capacities of Canadian CSOs to respond to CSO-determined needs and priorities.

Background

CPB funding windows have been a crucial predictable resource for Canadian CSO's development programming for the past 40 years, and there are few alternatives available in Canada for large-scale financing of this work. CPB programs have been judged effective because they have been highly responsive to Canadian CSOs, who in turn work closely in long time partnerships and with people at the community level, staying the course with priorities determined by local needs and aspirations.

But, over the past three years, these CSO responsive partnerships have been challenged by unclear timeframes for decisions by the Minister, an imposition of requirements in an uncertain policy and procedural vacuum in CPB, and some refusals for funding bridges to accommodate delays. It has resulted in significant disruption to the

capacities of Canadian CSOs to maintain their effectiveness and accountability to long-standing partners and beneficiaries in developing countries. These impacts were compounded by the perception that negative decisions about particular Canadian CSOs were being driven by partisan and political considerations, rather than by established and transparent standards.

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation has been promoting standards for CPB based on strongly responsive programming relationships, focused on effective aid delivery and CIDA's strategic objectives as outlined in the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act. To what degree does the new "Partnerships with Canadians" initiative address these procedural and policy concerns? Will the initiative strengthen the capacities of Canadian CSOs to be effective development actors, working closely with partners and counterparts on the ground?

An Overview of the Initiative

Canadian Partnership Branch will be organized around two core programs – a "Global Citizens Program" and a "Partners for Development Program". The Global Citizens Program will focus on activities that "engage and mobilize Canadians as global citizens" around "public awareness", "education and knowledge" and "youth engagement". According to CIDA's Plans and Priorities for 2010/11 approximately \$30 million is spent on these and related activities.

The Partners for Development Program seems to cover all other remaining resources for CPB (currently the remaining budget for CPB is approximately \$200 million) and does so under five categories for allocating the remaining resources for CPB. CPB will continue to be a strong funding partner with a diverse cross section of Canadian CSOs involved in development cooperation, with windows for both small (less than \$2 million in revenue) and large (institutional program funding for organizations over \$2 million) project proponents. Notably, the Minister affirms that CPB will support "knowledge partners" as one of the categories. The announcement notes such organizations play "a vital role in identifying transformative and innovative development practices that can help improve the effectiveness of development and/or undertake evidence-based research and policy development". Support will also continue for volunteer cooperation and university partners.

An Assessment

1. A Global Citizens Program

The Global Citizens Program is very welcome. It provides CPB with the opportunity to bring coherence to highly dispersed CIDA initiatives in public engagement, which have never recovered from the major cuts to public engagement programs in 1995. A Global Citizens Program in CPB may provide an opportunity to finally set out an Agency strategy for public engagement. The objectives for the Global Citizens Program must be focused on strengthening a diversity of approaches to active

Canadian global citizenship and encouraging citizens' active participation and engagement with a range of global issues in their communities. It must not be simply an avenue for funding public relations activities promoting the Agency and its work in developing countries. There is also no evidence that funding for this Program will go above the \$30 million which has been allocated in the past few years. To have the impact required, CSOs have called for a stepped-up investment of at least 5% of CIDA's program resources for public engagement programming.

2. Country and Sector Focus

The criteria to limit 50% of Partnership programming to the government's 20 priority countries and to insist that 80% of programming fall within the three priority thematic areas unnecessarily reduces CIDA's responsiveness to Canadian CSO priorities and the expressed needs of their partners. Canadian CSO institutional programs supported by CIDA are based on locally-identified needs through long-standing geographic- specific partnerships. Their effectiveness will be seriously challenged if required to change every three or five years according to the latest country and sector priorities of the government of the day.

These targets, when applied to individual institutional partners, will perpetuate current CPB pressures on Canadian CSO to artificially change the countries where they program and to alter programmatic areas of work in which they and their partners have particular expertise and impact. Pressures to address CIDA-imposed priorities in programmatic proposals undermine local CSO ownership, contorting proposals that should be assessed, not against CIDA priorities, but against the degree to which they are determined by local need and partnerships, with demonstrated impact. CSO experience to date with CPB is that artificial CIDA targets will compound, not reduce, administrative burden in developing programmatic project proposals consistent with the mandate of the CSO.

Nor are such directives and programmatic burdens on Canadian CSOs even necessary for CIDA to achieve its Agency goals concerning focus and sectoral themes. CPB support for CSOs make up only 7% of CIDA's total programming resources. Without any formal directives, already approximately 40% of current (2008/09) Canadian CSO programming in CPB is directed to the Government's 20 countries of focus (and almost 70% is concentrated in 30 countries). Given that most Canadian CSOs work in long-term partnerships these countries have been relatively stable over the past decade. According to 2008/09 official statistics for CPB funding, CSOs already had strong concentrations in programming in areas closely related to the three themes: education, health and agriculture as well as democracy strengthening.

What then is the effectiveness advantage gained by CIDA in setting out formal quantitative targets for CPB to achieve marginal "improvements" in focus, particularly when compared against the attendant potentially dramatic programmatic disruption and the undermining of effectiveness in existing CSO

partnerships? Many Canadian CSOs have already accepted the idea of focus in their own planning processes, but are doing so in countries where they work based upon joint analysis with partners and other CSOs, expressions of local need, and comparative expertise. Country and sector targets for CPB may only serve to reduce Canadian CSO responsiveness to partner priorities and the potential for effective development programming at the grassroots level.

3. Adhering to CIDA's "development effectiveness principles"

The acknowledgement by the Minister of the recognition given to CSOs in the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) is welcomed. However, her elaboration of "CSO development principles that follow is highly misleading, as there were no "development effectiveness principles for civil society organizations recognized in the Accra Agenda for Action." The principles and commitments in the AAA were made solely in relation to donors and governments who were the ones who signed the AAA and relate to their actions only.

The AAA recognizes CSOs as development actors in their own right distinct from governments and official donors; it committed donors and governments to make maximum effort to enable CSOs to be effective development actors. Rather than defining principles that apply to CSOs, the AAA explicitly accepted and sought support for a CSO-led process: the Open Forum on CSO Development Effectiveness over the next two years will define relevant development effectiveness principles for CSOs and the implications for their work, in time for the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in December 2011.

Since 2008, CIDA has worked closely with other donors and CSOs to monitor the implementation of the AAA provisions with respect to civil society development effectiveness. But recently CIDA failed to join other donors to provide financial resources to realize their AAA commitment to support the Open Forum for CSO development effectiveness. This past March, CCIC members made their contribution to the Open Forum by undertaking one of the first consultations to determine these principles, which are very distinct from those elaborated in the Partnerships with Canadians Initiative.

CIDA recently turned down a request to contribute some modest funding into a donor-pooled fund in support of the global process undertaken by hundreds of CSOs in the Open Forum. This seeming divergence from previous CIDA work in this area was noted by international CSOs involved in the process in a letter to the Minister earlier this year, which has never received a reply.

"Development effectiveness" principles are set out by the Minister, seemingly from the AAA. Some can be found in the AAA related to donor/government partnerships; others, such as the need for exit strategies, have no place in the AAA. Several of those proposed by the Minister have in fact been challenged by CSOs in the Open Forum process as potentially undermining of key CSO roles. For example,

many CSOs contend that “coordination of civil society efforts with government plans and programs” may be possible for some areas of service delivery, but in many instances would contradict an essential CSO role to monitor and propose poverty oriented alternatives for developing country government and donor policies and commitments. Calling for a simple “[e]xit strategy that ensures results achieved are sustainable” is a very naïve approach to supporting CSO development results. These can only be achieved over a long time horizon and are contingent on enabling policies from many development actors, including governments and donors.

A simplistic application of these CIDA self-defined “development principles” to current CSO programs and project proposals, particularly outside of engagement with the Open Forum process, is highly disrespectful to the global process accepted in Accra. It will compound an already burdensome application process by demanding the impossible of CSOs and their partners, and potentially further undermine complex CSO partnerships and innovative development programming.

4. Proposals must be “consistent with Canadian government policy”

Given recent experiences of partisan political standards in CIDA decision-making such as for Kairos, Alternatives, CCIC, and women’s organizations, among others, a requirement that the content of proposals must be consistent with Canadian government policy is deeply troubling and potentially undermining of Canadian democratic practice.

One of the most consistent requests by developing country CSOs with their Canadian counterparts is that we hold our government to account for failures in its policies to promote poverty reduction and meet commitments in international cooperation agreements. This is a key CSO role that is widely acknowledged by the international community and a long-standing practice in Canada. It has resulted in demonstrable improved Canadian policies and practices in international cooperation.

The announced provision undermines objective standards for the determination of CPB funding decisions and potentially puts the Minister in contravention of the ODA Accountability Act’s three explicit criteria for all ODA decisions. It gives explicit permission for unlimited Ministerial discretion to exercise partisan criteria for organizations that may be critical of government policies, but whose development mandate includes monitoring and fair critical comment on government policy directions.

Conclusion

In summary, after four years of uncertainty, the “Partnerships with Canadians” initiative establishes some clear directions for CPB funding relationships. While future guidance documents may provide more detail, the policy directions stated in the

Minister's announcement may unfortunately accentuate the retreat from principles of responsiveness and respect for CSOs as development actors in their own right. The latter principles have been the foundation and 40-year legacy of CPB's commitment to strengthen the capacities of Canadian CSOs to respond to CSO-determined needs and priorities.

Over these 40 years, CSOs have demonstrated a strong consistency with CIDA's overarching mandate of poverty reduction, while contributing to effective and accountable programming initiatives in developing countries. Flexibility and steady partnerships has been the key to increasingly effective Canadian CSO efforts in building sustainable capacity in developing countries to respond to evolving local conditions and produce lasting results. It remains to be tested whether the terms established by the Minister's "Partnerships with Canadians" initiative will permit or further constrain the evolution of these Canadian CSO efforts in the coming years.

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