

Best of Times, Worst of Times: Canada's Foreign Aid Direction

By Gerry Barr

If one was to choose the icon that best reflected Canada's foreign aid direction at the end of the first decade of the new Millennium it would have to be a cross-roads sign, festooned with multi-directional arrows to just about everywhere. Many of those arrows point in opposite directions, so predicting Canada's future path is a challenge.

The country has new legislation on foreign aid spending that puts the emphasis on human rights and poverty, but government has been slow to implement the new law. There has been a tepid recovery in aid levels, but that could be reversed as Canada tries to address debts created by stimulus spending during the recession. Non-governmental organizations and humanitarian groups may be in trouble as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) reviews its "partnership" programs.

Canada's reinvestment in foreign aid, after a decade of cost cutting, was always a perilous project. In the '90s, the global poor were unrepresented at the Cabinet table when deficit fighting became the government's main idea. That's why Canada started the present decade as a delinquent donor with levels of aid at barely 0.25% of Gross National Income (GNI), compared to a globally agreed-to international target (0.7% of GNI) almost three times that level.

At the beginning of the decade, Prime Minister Jean Chretien became a champion for aid to Africa as he prepared to host the G-8 summit in Kananaskis, Alberta. He committed Canada to doubling its own aid contribution by 2010 and he pushed global leaders to double aid to Africa.

Prime Minister Chretien's strategy was simple – eight percent increases annually in the budget for Official Development Assistance. The number of dollars in the budget grew steadily, but so did the economy. That's why, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper takes the chair for the G-8 meeting in Huntsville next year, Canada's aid performance will be mired at 0.3% of GNI.

All this would matter less if the quality of Canada's aid were better. The trouble is that foreign aid has been managed by an always-changing cast of junior ministers. None of these ministers (there have been five since 2000) have had the Cabinet weight necessary to boost Canada's aid level relative to the 0.7% target. All of them, however, *have* had enough influence to launch reforms and re-visioning and reorganization of CIDA, producing perpetual turmoil in the department.

Some of this uncertainty might have been reduced with Canada's new legislation to guide aid spending. The *Official Development Assistance Accountability Act* nails down the purpose of foreign aid. The law says aid must 1) reduce poverty; 2) take account of the perspectives (and ideas) of the poor; and 3) be consistent with international human rights standards. It's a groundbreaking piece of law that puts Canada firmly on the road to a human rights approach.

Unfortunately, there have been a few speed bumps along the way. Recent decisions at CIDA suggest that the poverty and human rights standards may be set aside in favor of other, more politically attractive considerations. For example, a recent decision to change the list of CIDA's priority countries dropped seven African countries (among the poorest in the world) in favor of more middle-income developing countries in the Americas and Asia. Minister for International Cooperation, Bev Oda said her reasons were based on three things: the prevalence of real needs, the capacity to benefit from aid and alignment with Canadian foreign policy interests.

Those are all interesting reasons, but none of them are the standard set out in the law. The law requires that any decision that has an important effect on aid spending be based solely on the standards of the law, rather than the availability of spending opportunities and foreign policy interests.

And it looks like it is not just the letter but also the spirit of the new legislation that is suffering. A human rights approach in aid spending means, among other things, giving priority to supporting the organizations of “rights bearers”. In ordinary parlance that means citizens’ groups, civil society organizations and social movements that are a key part of ensuring democratic accountability and citizens’ rights.

But CIDA just announced that it has cut all funding for one of Canada’s most important ecumenical human rights groups. KAIROS is an organization of 11 national churches and faith-based organizations that works with more than 20 partners around the world on human rights, peace and ecological justice. The cut has prompted none other than Desmond Tutu to say that it would be “an unparalleled setback for the poor, vulnerable and disenfranchised if the voice and work of KAIROS in the global South is muted”. Bishop Tutu knows how important international accompaniment and partnership was in the end of the struggle to end apartheid.

So where is Canada headed with foreign aid at the end of this first decade of the Millennium? Canada has to decide whether it is serious about global poverty and human rights. The arrows to just about everywhere on that cross-roads sign have to come down, replaced with just two. Human rights and Ending global poverty – each pointing in the same direction.

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