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Shameful retreat on foreign aid

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Foreign aid was hit hard in last week's federal budget as Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced a freeze on aid spending.

It's easy to get lost in numbers, percentages and charts, but in a world where more than 1 billion people are undernourished and 72 million children are unable to go to school, we should never forget that when we talk about foreign aid we're talking about the human struggle to escape poverty and pursue a life of dignity.

What, then, does the federal budget say about Canada's commitment to help end global poverty?

Significantly, this was the first budget to showcase the Conservative approach to foreign aid spending, as the 8 per cent increases to aid in previous Conservative budgets had made good on a Liberal promise to double aid spending by 2010. But given the opportunity to put its own stamp on Canada's role in the world, the Conservative government chose to turn its back on the world's poor.

In order to meet the United Nations target for aid spending of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income, the government needed to announce 14 per cent annual increases to aid spending for the next 10 years. We needed 14 per cent – we got zero.

With this budget, Canada, in terms of generosity, will fall to the back of the pack – 18th out of 22 donor countries for aid, Canada's lowest ranking ever.

This leadership failure is surprising as it comes in a year when the international spotlight will be on Canada. World leaders will meet here in June for the G8 and G20 summits.

More perplexing, this freeze on aid spending comes after the government has announced that maternal and child health will be a priority for the G8 meeting. Last week's budget, in fact, stated that Canada will "work to secure global spending on this priority." Canada can't lead by calling on world leaders to act and then fail to back the call with the monies needed.

In addition to the maternal and child health announcement, Canada has, recently and rightly, committed to double aid to agriculture and to provide long-term support to Haiti as it rebuilds following the devastating earthquake.

But with zero increases to the aid budget, these and other aid programs may suffer as the government will end up having to "rob Peter to pay Paul."

This lack of funding should not be rationalized away because we are in the midst of a global financial crisis. It is the poorest and most vulnerable in developing countries who are suffering most. The financial crisis is driving nearly 50 million more people into extreme poverty as jobs are lost.

Other aid donors have managed to maintain their aid performance despite dealing with more serious impacts on government finances from the global financial crisis than those experienced by Canada.

The United Kingdom is on track to reach the 0.7 per cent target by 2013 and a number of countries – Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands – continue to be highly generous, with aid commitments well above the 0.7 per cent target.

In 2010, Canada's contribution will fall to 0.33 per cent and plummet to 0.28 per cent by 2014. Canada's performance is nothing short of an international embarrassment.

But international reputation aside, foreign aid matters. It matters in terms of quantity, but also quality.

On the quality side, Canada recently passed legislation focusing foreign aid spending on ending poverty while taking into account the voices of the poor and international human rights standards.

This legislation matters because it means that aid cannot be politicized to further foreign policy agendas. It matters because it means that foreign aid must be consistent with human rights and integral to the ability of the world's poor to claim their human rights – the right to food, health and education.

On the quantity side, unfortunately, this federal budget is an indication that Canada is not serious about ending global poverty.

Foreign aid matters because poverty is not inevitable. Poverty exists because of the choices we make. We need to make the right ones.