

Welcome to CCIC's 42nd annual general meeting "Citizen Action in Challenging Times." My name is Karen Takacs and I am chair of the Board of CCIC.

For a sector who is used to and even thrives on a good challenge, this is definitely more than we could have hoped for. These are indeed challenging times. The theme for the AGM last year was "Rights and Justice in a Time of Economic Crisis." We talked about the significant impact of the food, fuel and financial crises and recognized the ever more important commitment of Canada and of Canadians to international development. Although there was deep concern there was still a hint of optimism in the room. We were riding a bit off the high from the Accra Agenda for Action and the High Level Forum which resulted in international recognition of the role of civil society as development actors in their own right – which Canada led. This was a high water mark internationally – and a high water mark in our relationship and cooperation with CIDA.

However, this relationship was changing and we were also beginning to question whether or not Canada did in fact value our role. As Kairos was asked to report on their advocacy work and as Oxfam went without funding for a few months, the advocacy chill was beginning to set in. We also began to hear about subtle and not so subtle suggestions from CIDA to take particular language out of proposals – references to human rights and women's equality.

At the same time we were witnessing major policy shifts take place without any consultation or discussion. New countries of focus and new priorities and other major policies were announced through press releases.

Over the last few years Canada's reputation as a leader and a good global citizen has been eroding. Whether that's in Copenhagen or at other international fora, our role in the world has changed. We are now one of the least generous donors – ranking 18 out of 22 OECD countries and the situation will only get worse.

So not only has there not been any consultation or debate about these major changes – we have also witnessed our voice and capacity as a sector being undermined and eroded – dare I say dismantled. Delays in funding, the lack of transparency in process and decision-making combined with actual cuts in funding – the list of organizations affected is growing. Most recently Match, the only women's international development organization devoted to women's rights has – after 34 years – lost all of their CIDA funding and will now close.

As managers our instinct is to fix things – don't make noise, don't draw attention, make friends, gather support and we'll get through this. But slowly organizations – very credible groups doing exemplary work – are whittling away at their reserves – reserves that took years to build up. Social capital, relations with partners and expertise are all disappearing. The advocacy chill has indeed set in and "just keep your head down" has become a mantra for many.

I don't mean to sound naive. Our mandate as executives is to ensure that we achieve our mission. For some - and for many boards - this is interpreted as the need to not only preserve but also grow your organization. But something greater is at stake here.

If we think that this is just about one particular organization – *they're too political or just on the wrong side of the debate – or they're poorly manage* - we fool ourselves. This is not just about particular organizations. This is about Canada's role in the world and whether or not we believe that as a democratic society Canadians can and must indeed debate and contribute to ensuring our best development efforts.

So this is a moment for us as a community to come together, to determine if we believe in and want to preserve the public space for dialogue and debate and the engagement of Canadians in the world. Do we believe that it is our duty to hold our government accountable? And how can we work together to preserve these principles given the challenging context?

We may not agree. We will have different perspectives and interests – such is the richness of our community. And we could let these differences become fault lines to be exploited or we could seize this opportunity and emerge stronger, clearer, smarter and re-energized.

There is much that we have in common – a shared desire to end global poverty and promote human rights. And we are not without power. As a sector we contribute 1 billion a year to development cooperation. We have power, influence and resources and we are not alone. The space for public debate is shrinking in many places around the world. We can learn from the courage and determination of our counterparts who face significant threats – not just to their funding. I don't want to be overly dramatic but this is a unique moment – unprecedented in fact. So the AGM is designed to gather your best thoughts, to encourage discussion and debate. This is not just about CIDA or our relationship with this particular government but about what we hope for and what we are prepared to work for as a community in the long term.