

## Canada

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### Promoting ownership and gender equality

[intro]Local ownership is “a key principle of effective programming” for Canada’s International Development Agency (CIDA). In a recently published strategy for improving aid effectiveness, CIDA intends to respond to development strategies that “are developed by recipient countries – their governments and their people – and reflect their priorities”, and in doing so, “[cede] more responsibility to developing country partners”.

[body text]Ownership implies relationships based on shared values, citizen empowerment and respect for sovereignty. Challenges identified by CIDA in implementing this approach centre on accountability, local capacity and authentic means for citizen participation. For CIDA, pursuing gender equality exemplifies these challenges: “women are still under-represented in decision-making structures and specific strategies are often required to ensure their participation and the incorporation of gender analysis into programming strategies”.<sup>(1)</sup>

From the viewpoint of Southern development activists and governments, the central issue in development cooperation is not 'ownership' (i.e. what southern governments should do) but rather the many layers of northern donor-imposed conditionalities or 'policy undertakings' for aid, which profoundly affect the development options available to recipient governments and other 'partners'. These activists share a deep resentment about prescribed aid relationships and often ill-conceived external interventions in the social and political fabric of their countries. Economic policy conditions that accompany 'aid' have had significant adverse consequences for many millions of people who now live in poverty. The development challenge, in this later perspective, is not just improved capacity or 'good governance', but more fundamentally “who decides, for whom” in aid decision-making, in a context where the dynamics of financing and power are extremely unequal. Can northern donors respect ownership, while avoiding practices of imposed conditionality?

Differing perspectives on aid no doubt reflect more profound debates about the place of values – international justice, equality and solidarity – rather than national interests. Many donor policies, including CIDA’s, are increasingly influenced, on paper at least, by these values. For example, the objective for CIDA’s 1999 *Policy on Gender Equality* is “to support women and girls in the realisation of their full human rights”.<sup>(2)</sup> The Policy is explicitly rooted in international human rights treaties<sup>(3)</sup> and the Beijing Platform of Action, which states that

“The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are matters of human rights and conditions of social justice, and should not be seen in isolation as a women’s issue. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society. Empowerment of women and gender equality are prerequisites for achieving political, social economic, cultural, and environmental security among all peoples.” (*Beijing Platform for Action*, Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, Paragraph 41.)

## The Reality of Aid 2002

For CIDA, tackling the root causes of gender inequality, according to the gender equality policy, is essential to achieving the Agency's goal of sustainable poverty reduction. The *Policy* moves beyond an agenda for integrating women into development and suggests the need for structural transformative change. The *Policy* assumes a proactive role for CIDA staff in promoting good practices in the design and implementation of projects, and in their control over the terms of programme assistance.

What lessons can we take from instances where CIDA has implemented its *Policy on Gender Equality* in overseas programmes? Do these instances represent 'imposed conditionality'? Are there credible donor practices that can preserve a respect for ownership of development strategies, while sustaining accountability to a substantial and progressive CIDA-initiated policy on gender equality? To pursue these questions, this chapter reviews some recent analyses of ownership as reflected in donor practices in support of Sector Wide Approaches (SWAs, which CIDA is piloting in a number of African countries). It also draws on some donor evaluations and interviews with selected CIDA personnel committed to implementing the gender equality policy. (4)

### Understanding 'ownership' in donor relations

In donor literature, the notion of ownership is a common-sense expression of the effective limits of donor interventions to affect change in directions that *external actors* deem appropriate. It implies for most, including CIDA, that national governments must lead in all aspects of development policies and strategies, but must do so democratically and in consultation with key stakeholders. However, the tensions between the form of ownership by government (with the inclusion of other stakeholders) and donor policies and prescriptions for development are often not defined or analysed. In the words of a British analyst, national ownership raises the questions: "Will donors stand back? How is eligibility for inclusion in consultation and debate determined and by whom? How are conflicts [over appropriate policies] and imbalances of power handled?" (5)

While CIDA is not among them, several donors have explored some of these questions. For the Swedish International Development Agency, SIDA, for example, the national owner is responsible for the project, while "the donor is responsible for its own work as donor, [with] the first and foremost of the donor's task...to make sure that aid funds are not wasted on bad projects".(6) But then who defines the 'bad project'?

A more subtle notion of ownership, but perhaps equally problematic from the perspective of donor practice, is suggested in a study for the Finnish Aid Programme: "ownership refers to relationships among stakeholders and is high when beneficiaries substantially influence design, implementation and operations, representing the interests of citizens, and is transparent and accountable".(7) This understanding of ownership focuses on the ultimate beneficiaries of a given aid intervention and looks beyond the donor-project implementer relationship:

"Many of the problems of ownership are generated by conflicts of interest between the target groups of development cooperation and, on the other hand, the authorities and other organizations in partner countries tasked with the administration of projects and programmes...A project, where the implementor

benefits at the expense of the beneficiaries, no matter how it strengthens the implementor in relation to the donor, can never be a good project.' (8)

Here donors see themselves as the guardians of the interests of beneficiaries; they cannot, therefore, avoid setting limits to the actions of other stakeholders. But how are the interests of the beneficiaries expressed? This approach implies that the beneficiaries have the freedom and capacity to express their rights and assume meaningful ownership of development options within their communities. Likewise, the instruments of international cooperation must enhance innovative forms of 'popular ownership' of public policy, a condition that is seldom achieved by citizens in northern donor countries.

The almost exclusive government-to-government orientation of recent donor strategies for SWAPs and coordinated comprehensive development frameworks, which is also reflected in CIDA's *Strengthening Aid Effectiveness*, undermines this more nuanced approach to national ownership. While ownership is never expressly identified exclusively with government, the primary donor reference points for ownership are in practice government policies, poverty strategies and sector programmes. These policies are increasingly conflated with highly flawed public policy processes to produce a World Bank/IMF Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Gender analysis and issues relating to gender equality and poverty reduction seldom influence these processes or their results.(9)

### **Integrating Gender Equality through Donor Initiatives**

Are the policy objectives for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in CIDA development initiatives an imposition of western donor values and agendas?(10) This is often the reaction of recipients and donor officials.(11) In considering this issue, it is important to separate the actual practices and policy demands of donors from a gender analysis that should inform their stated goals for poverty eradication. The extensive literature on the gendered nature of power relations, from the level of the household to the global economy, cannot be ignored and should inform practice.

The feminisation of poverty is well-known. Women and girls make up more than 70% of people living in absolute poverty, while two thirds of illiterate adults are women. As the UNDP points out "these disparities result from gender-based inequalities within households, and are reinforced by gender biases outside the household, such as in labour markets, credit institutions and the legal system" and "they also result from various social norms that lead to women's social exclusion or economic subordination". (12) NGOs and independent researchers have documented the disproportionate impact of structural adjustment policies on women. A recent study by southern researchers points to the socio-political and gender dynamics of economic reforms and economic policy-making that weaken women's participation, while seldom proposing policies that address women's gender equality concerns.(13) The interactions between the various dimensions of gender inequality and poverty are complex but integral to strategies to affect change and poverty.

Gender relations in many societies, North and South, are highly contested, and the power exercised by those who benefit from gendered social hierarchies is challenged. Women's organisations and movements are active throughout the South and one increasingly finds women's advocates within government Ministries.(14) Most southern

## The Reality of Aid 2002

governments have ratified the core international Covenants on women's rights and have agreed to commitments in the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women's *Platform for Action*. In many of these same countries, women's organisations are at the forefront of social, economic and political activities to hold their governments accountable to these commitments. Both of these dimensions – the feminisation of poverty and diverse popular organisations promoting women's rights in development – are essential for assessing the realisation of values of equality and social justice in donor, poverty-focused practice that respects ownership. On both counts, many donors are found wanting.

Evaluations of the implementation of gender equality policy by CIDA and other donors, on the whole, reveal a marginalisation of gender concerns; at best women/girl beneficiaries are seen as add-ons for sectoral-wide social programmes and are invisible in most socio-economic projects. (15) A detailed 1997 review of CIDA's Central America Gender Equity Policy Fund concluded that the Fund had been successful in incorporating gender equity in women-specific projects but this orientation was largely absent from the planning and implementation of other bilateral projects. (16)

For recipient governments, implementing institutions and donors alike, policy commitments to gender equality issues seem to 'evaporate' when resources are allocated to implement projects. Differing degrees of receptivity towards gender policies, and levels of expertise in understanding their implications, by donor officials, often undermine capacity to plan and implement gender sensitive programmes. According to a 1998 CIDA Performance Review, after more than 20 years of policies relating to gender issues in development, and considerable investment in training CIDA officials, there is still significant misunderstanding of the implications of the policy and resistance to applying it to all development initiatives. Accountability is a key concern. Implementation "depends on individual initiative (rather than professional accountability)" and "there are few rewards for innovative work in WID & GE programming". (17)

Similarly, the receptivity of senior government officials in recipient countries and the place of influential champions within and outside government are crucial for sustained commitment to implementing gender policy commitments. (18) DAC assessments point out that the process of defining beneficiary needs and essential services has strong political as well as technical dimensions. It is critical that voices of women and men from different social groups are represented (for example advocacy by women's groups on violence in relation to health sector programme priorities). (19) Increasing attention to decentralisation, as a way of opening opportunities for local priorities and participation within communities, may engage more women. But often decentralisation can compromise policies aimed at gender equality as local élites, dominated by men, capture local decision-making bodies. (20)

A common response of donor officials to their limitations and real constraints in realising progress in gender equality, as they respond to their own institutional needs to demonstrate benefits for women, is to impose targets and policy 'undertakings' in formal agreements with implementing partners. These strictures have marginal impact on the implementation of plans and programmes to fulfill donor policies (and even less so where multiple donors, who do not share common concerns for gender impact, are involved in sector support programmes). Rigid and mechanistic approaches may

provoke policy discussions with implementing institutions, but have even less impact for the intended women beneficiaries. The latter remain both poor and excluded from programme opportunities because of ill-designed programmes as well as structural impediments to their full participation in the economic, social and political life of their communities. Yet these approaches and results need not prevail. There is sufficient experience to draw lessons for positive contributions that donors can make for gender equality, sustained through women's empowerment.

### **Lessons and Approaches for Locally-Owned Gender Sensitive Development Initiatives**

[bullet and indent]For CIDA, assuring effective approaches for poverty reduction and gender equality depends on clear accountability to CIDA-determined country-specific and gender-sensitive poverty strategies, reflecting authentic participation and support by those living in poverty. Country programmes must also be guided by an explicit country-specific gender equality strategy. The latter analyses the specific context for understanding issues of gender equality, in order to identify barriers and opportunities for making progress, and possible roles for CIDA as an external actor. The poverty orientation of gender equality strategies should be sensitive to differences of interest among women, as well as issues of accountability and representivity within civil society in relation to the interests of poor women. Ideally, bilateral country programme planning processes should engage all development actors, but most particularly partner institutions, where partners and CIDA agree on a mutual set of goals and medium-term results, to which each side is accountable. Transparent and institutionally sanctioned accountability to these frameworks is essential.



[indent]Where accountability to gender-sensitive frameworks exists, largely due to initiatives by individual officials, CIDA has been able to give a gendered orientation in its response to programming opportunities that are proposed and managed by government ministries and other implementing institutions. In negotiating the technical design of these programmes, CIDA personnel have been able to draw on their country knowledge of gender issues. They are able to direct benefits to women and girls, sometimes on the basis of economic or social returns without explicit reference to gender issues, where these are highly sensitive.

[bullet and indent]A donor culture that emphasises listening skills, patience and humility in understanding the dynamics and cultural specificity of a society is essential. Understanding cultural specificity is important for the expression of shared ethical values in policy dialogue. It is equally important to accept that there may be areas that cannot be spoken about directly. For gender equality, these skills are critical and may need to be augmented with commissioned research that disaggregates country-specific gender information and analysis. Change is a long-term process that donors may – at best – facilitate but never direct.

[bullet and indent]In the words of a CIDA official, ownership is not a value in and of itself, particularly with governments that are highly unrepresentative of their citizens' interests. Where these governments define a strategy and proposals for funding, CIDA has a responsibility to determine whether there is 'a fit' with the donor's priorities and

## The Reality of Aid 2002

poverty strategies. More explicitly, a DFID official, in one review, is quoted as saying that "partnership requires overlapping objectives, but they will not usually coincide totally, and...it will usually aid understanding to be quite open about it, and negotiate a common programme, which tries to reflect the different perspectives of the partners".(21) There is a fine balance to be struck, but it is one that must, above all, reflect the choice of development partners, whose interest and concerns represent authentic links to intended beneficiaries, and include voices and advocates for targeting women and girls. Relationships are based on trust and donors need to accept that they must move with the pace of partner organisations and related social actors, particularly where change involves political risk.

[bullet and indent]Strengthening the participation, voice and rights of those living in poverty is one of the most important aspects of the change process. The engagement of women's organisations, gender specialists, and women in social movements working for change in gender relations is critical. Three decades of attention to women's rights in development suggests that external pressure is essential for sustained accountability for gender issues in government-managed sector programmes and other donor-financed development projects.

[indent]While this support can, and should, be targeted – with donors contributing – to strengthening women's organisations' voices and decision-making influence, donors can also influence through their methods of work. In Malawi, for example, CIDA has hired a prominent local gender specialist and devoted resources to work in policy dialogue with both government and other donors to promote gender analysis of sector components of the country's PRSP. CIDA has also brought expertise in analysing gender sensitivity of national budgets from South Africa to expose both the donor community in Malawi and government officials to this analysis. (22) In some West African countries, CIDA officials have been meeting regularly with women's organisations, peasants' associations and community organisations to hear directly their concerns. They are sometimes able to open channels of communication between these organisations and government ministers and officials.

[indent]A very proactive role by several donors, in the case of Bangladesh's health sector programme, did bring some Bangladeshi voices on gender to the table, and achieved some significant short-term changes. But the degree to which these changes are dependent on donor personnel and support for these selected individuals may limit the depth of these changes and the sustainability of a gender agenda at senior levels of government. (23)

- ▶ [bullet and indent]Over the medium and long term, much can be achieved through formal and informal policy dialogue. As a bilateral donor, CIDA is increasing its capacity and its orientation towards broad policy dialogue as a central aspect of its international cooperative relationship with developing country governments. As such, it is being drawn into joint donor dialogue on both sector programmes and IMF/Bank initiatives for poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs).

[indent]How might gender equality policy influence this dialogue, without imposing conditionality or undermining ownership? Despite its modest financial resources relative to other donors, CIDA has had a strong reputation for its work in gender policy and analysis. CIDA officials have played 'niche roles' both with other donors and government officials, bringing gender analysis to policy discussion. We have already

## The Reality of Aid 2002

pointed to the importance of strengthening domestic women's voices in these policy processes (as well as in implementation). But CIDA can also direct its expertise towards leading donor agencies to create political space for more sustained dialogue and greater understanding of gender issues.

[indent]Policy dialogue is a political process that is always dynamic and contested, and in which the influence of even the leading donors waxes and wanes and is rapidly diluted as one moves away from central government structures and officials. But experience suggests that there are several important elements for constructive dialogue.

[bullet list and indent further]Connecting to national policy frameworks for poverty reduction and gender equality, as well as formally ratified international Covenants, establishes universal, shared values for policy dialogue, upon which to build constructive commentary and programme advice.

Donors can strengthen public access to gender and social analysis for poverty strategies through research and proposals for goals and benchmarks that are gender sensitive. Accessible information and analysis provides support for women to press their own agendas for change through their civic organisations and coalitions, elected representatives, national commissions etc. [end bullet list]

[indent]Capacity building for greater policy impact by local constituencies requires not only technical and organisational skills but can also benefit from cross-country learning (such as women's alternative budgeting exercises or defining legal rights for women), which donors can facilitate. In the words of a Canadian researcher, "the task of helping women find their voice in the policy making process is a complicated undertaking and faces many obstacles: a male-dominated policy making system; the limited capacity of women's organisations in economic policy analysis, and the general complexity of policy making processes..."(24) Training for policy insertion (knowledge of rights and issues) and broad institutional gender sensitisation at all levels of governance, create greater space and policy roles for women activists. Official donors and NGOs can contribute by giving priority to these activities. (25)

## Conclusion

Gender identities and relations shape the way we live and the quality of our lives – in family, in community and beyond. Gender equality is a universal right that should be 'owned' by all citizens no matter where they live. Its achievement is fundamental to the economic, social, political and cultural rights that define a shared commitment to eradicating poverty. Yet, donor agencies, imposing a variety of self-defined development objectives and frameworks on partners, often undermine, or at best ignore, gender issues. While gender-sensitive programming is still marginal in CIDA's aid interventions (in 1998/99, projects coded to gender equality represented less than 5% of CIDA's Programme disbursements), some generic lessons from experience suggest that it is possible to bridge the inherent tension between respecting ownership and making policy prescriptions. Isolated positive experience suggests that CIDA and other donors need to devote urgent attention to identifying specific changes in their practice and expertise to extend what is now largely individual-driven programme activity for gender equality to programming that is accountable in all aspects to the

## The Reality of Aid 2002

interests of women's empowerment among people living in poverty. These changes require proactive support at the highest level of donor institutions.

Development is not a process easily amenable to bureaucratic and technical fixes. It is, rather, a political process that must engage people, particularly those living in poverty and powerlessness, in negotiating with each other, with their governments, and with the world community for policies and rights that advance their livelihood and secure their future in the world. Donors can design their practice of international cooperation to contribute, but in the words of CIDA's *Policy on Gender Equality*:

[display quote]'Outsiders cannot empower women: only women can empower themselves to make choices or speak out on their own behalf. However, institutions, including international cooperation agencies, can support processes that increase women's self confidence, develop their self-reliance, and help them set their own agendas.'

## Endnotes

(1) CIDA, 'Strengthening Aid Effectiveness: New Approaches to Canada's International Assistance Programme, A Framework for Consultation', May 2001, pp 14, 20. See CCIC's commentary on its Development Policy Page ([www.web.ca/ccic-ccci](http://www.web.ca/ccic-ccci)) and the Canada overview in the appendix of this Report.

(2) CIDA, 'Policy on Gender Equality', Public Works and Government Services Canada, March 1999 ([www.acdi-cida.gc.ca](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca)).

(3) Notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women.

(4) I am very grateful to CIDA officials who made the time to discuss these issues with me and share some recent documents. I alone am responsible for the lessons that I drew from this material. While the focus here is on CIDA programming, many of the issues discussed apply equally to Canadian NGO relationships with southern counterparts.

(5) Andrew Norton, 'Policy, Gender Equality and National Ownership in SWAps', Overseas Development Institute, Notes for a Presentation, 2001, page 2.

(6) Molund, S. 'Ownership in Focus: Discussion Paper for a Planned Evaluation', SIDA Studies in Evaluation, 00/5, November 2000, <http://www.sida.se/evaluation>, page 2.

(7) Moore, M, Gould, J, Joshi, A, Oksanen, R, 'Ownership in the Finnish Aid Programme', Report of Evaluation Study, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finland, 1996:3, page 9.

(8) Molund, S *op. cit.*, pp 9-10.

(9) Interview with CIDA official and Charles Abugre, 'Transformation at Last, or a New Instrument of Domination? An Analysis of the IMF and World Bank Poverty Reduction (PRS) Initiative' World Development Movement and ISODEC, mimeo, 2000; Policies to Roll-Back the State and Privatise? A Debt Report by the World Development Movement, April 2001, [www.wdm.org.uk](http://www.wdm.org.uk).

(10) See CIDA's very useful guide in *Questions About: Culture, Gender Equality and Development Cooperation*, February 2001, ([www.acdi-cida.gc.ca](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca)).

(11) One evaluation points to the frustration with this attitude by Ugandans at different levels of the education system who were committed to gender equality. Donors were not articulating a clear commitment to gender equality goals in basic education. 'This appears to be linked to the misconception that 'gender' is a western agenda, and a perception that too assertive an approach would compromise Ministry ownership. Yet Ugandans consulted were adamant that gender equality is a shared goal and that

## The Reality of Aid 2002

much of the momentum has come from the grassroots.' Sibbons, M, Norton, A, et. al., 'Mainstreaming Gender through Sector Wide Approaches in Education: Synthesis Report', ODI and Cambridge Education Consultants, October 2000, page 7.

(12) UNDP, *Human Development Report*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp 72-3

(13) See for example the excellent contributions in Tsikata, D, Kerr, J, *Demanding Dignity: Women Confronting Economic Reforms in Africa*. Ottawa / Accra: The North South Institute and Third World Network – Africa, 2000.

(14) *Ibid.*, pp 27 –32 and CIDA, *Questions About*.

(15) Woodford-Berger, P, 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A DAC review of agency experiences 1993 – 1998', SIDA Studies in Evaluation 00/1, 2000, pp 2 - 3 and DAC, 'Reference Guide: Gender Equality in SWAps' Draft, DAC Working Party on Gender Equality, 2001, no page numbers.

(16) CIDA, 'Review of Gender Equity and Programming Options for Central America', Central America Division, October 1997. This conclusion was also confirmed in CIDA, 'WID/GE Performance Review – Survey of Southern Women', Final Report, Performance Review Division, March 1996 page 14.

(17) CIDA, 'Women in Development and Gender Equality, 1992 – 1995: Performance Review Report', Hull: CIDA, July 1998, page C12.

(18) Tolhurst, R, Mainstreaming Gender in Sector Wide Approaches: An Overview of Issues in the Health Sector', Draft, January 2000, page 14.

(19) *Ibid.*, page 6.

(20) *Ibid.*, pages 9 – 10

(21) Norton, A, Bird, B, 'Social Development Issues in Sector-Wide Approaches', Draft Paper Prepared for DFID, nd, page 14.

(22) The South Africa Women's Budget Initiative examines the entire budget to determine its differential impact on women and men, girls and boys. It proposes specific changes in gender sensitive programmes and policies to account for these differences. See Debbie Budlender, 'The South Africa Women's Budget Initiative', Community Agency for Social Inquiry, Cape Town, South Africa, November 1998 (<http://magnet.undp.org/events/gender/india/Soutaf.htm>).

(23) Tolhurst, R., *op. cit.*, page 14

(24) Tsikata, D, Kerr, J., *op.cit.*, page 28

(25) One example of learning is the evolution of a CIDA-supported initiative in the Special Programme on Africa on Structural Adjustment and Gender in Africa in the early 1990s. An evaluation of this programme of research and workshops with African policymakers and donors was critical of both the degree of participation of African government officials and African civil society. This programme is now managed fully in the South through Third World Network – Africa. See CIDA, 'A Case Study of Policy Dialogue: Structural Adjustment and Gender in Africa (SAGA)', Evaluation Report, December 1997 and Tsikata, D, Kerr, J, *Demanding Dignity: Women Confronting Economic Reforms in Africa*. Ottawa / Accra: The North South Institute and Third World Network – Africa, 2000.

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