

GENDER EQUALITY IN CANADIAN COOPERATION: A MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY WHOSE TIME HAS COME

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« In no area of international development is the gap between stated intentions and operational reality as wide as it is in the promotion of equality between women and men¹⁹. »

To what extent have Canadian international cooperation stakeholders made good on their commitment to gender equality? How can we strengthen this commitment and renew our practices in such a way that they more effectively work to reduce gender inequality and advance the cause of women's rights? These are the central questions that guided my research under a fellowship from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, and they are equally central to the theme of this conference.

My discussion of these questions in this paper focuses on two Canadian international cooperation actors: on the one hand, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), with specific reference to the challenges facing the agency in the new context of aid effectiveness; and on the other, the civil society organizations (CSO) of Québec and Canada. Following this discussion, I present the idea of strengthening mutual responsibility among these actors as an option for catalyzing a sorely needed renewal of commitment to gender equality in Canadian international cooperation.

1. CIDA's commitment to gender equality in the context of aid effectiveness

While CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality is promising on paper, its implementation across

the agency's different programs, sectors, and partnerships has been uneven. Sustained concern for gender considerations is still strongly linked to individual commitment, and there is a phenomenon of "evaporation" whereby policies tend to fade away between adoption and implementation. The main reasons for this phenomenon of evaporation include insufficiently strong political will, the lack of a common vision of gender equality, insufficient human and financial resources, and an inadequate system of accountability. These factors (which may be considered internal) are exacerbated in the prevailing context of aid effectiveness.

The aid effectiveness agenda is governed by the principles of local ownership, alignment with poverty reduction strategies, and harmonization of donor country practices and policies.²⁰ In keeping with these principles, there has been a major transformation in the way that CIDA aid is delivered to recipient countries. It has moved from a project-based development approach to a program-based approach that more closely ties donor funding to national government planning. This is accomplished by new mechanisms such as sector budget support and general budget support.

¹⁹ UNDP, 2004. *Transforming the Mainstream*, p. 3. In Tiessen, 2005. *What's new about gender mainstreaming ? Three decades of Policy Creation and Development Strategies. Canadian Journal of Development Studies. Volume XXVI, Special issue*, p. 705.

²⁰ Paris Declaration, 2005.

In this new context, the application of CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality comes up against the aid effectiveness agenda in several ways. I would like to emphasize three main points here:

First, aid is expected and indeed required to have visible results. One of the four components of the Canadian aid effectiveness program is "clear accountability for results"²¹; that is, the emphasis is increasingly being placed on visible, short-term results that are readily demonstrable to the Canadian taxpayer. This emphasis is incompatible with actions designed to bring about a genuine transformation of gender relations, which are, by their very nature, long-term and complex. Moreover, it reinforces a trend towards depoliticizing development work and its intended results.

Secondly, gender equality has been replaced as a priority by a new sectoral focus that has led to a decrease in the number of sectors targeted per country and to heightened competition between sectors. This situation has been misinterpreted – and I stress the word – by certain people, to mean a narrowing of gender equality specific project possibilities. This pattern was further reinforced by a change in the status of gender equality at CIDA: whereas before 2005 it had a dual status as a priority and a cross-cutting theme, as of 2005, it is no longer a priority, only a cross-cutting theme.²²

Thirdly, in the new aid framework, there has been a trend towards the "evaporation" and weakening of gender equality policy. In a context where the principles of local ownership and alignment are dominant, CIDA staff feels caught between these principles and their attempts to implement the Policy on Gender Equality. The absence of a common vision of the policy's status within CIDA is thus exacerbated, the direct result being a weakening of the policy, which is increasingly being considered optional.

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The policy is further weakened by the fact that CIDA now has less control over the ways and processes by which its policy is implemented. With the new aid framework, the agency is dealing with multiple new stakeholders, including the donors and various national government departments. The inconsistency between the gender equality objectives of these stakeholders heightens the risk of eroding the cross-cutting approach. Thus, quite often, current commitments pay heed only to the lowest common denominator. Consequently, and as succinctly summarized by a CIDA staff member, "CIDA is giving millions to projects that utterly ignore gender."

In short, the aid effectiveness context has given rise to new challenges over and above the existing ones. It is urgent that we redouble our efforts to ensure that CIDA's policy produces real results. CIDA, like the other donors, must review its practices to ensure that it is better positioned to seize the opportunities and overcome the challenges raised by aid effectiveness. This work must be done on several fronts:

- within CIDA, where there is a sense that it is critical to bolster political will and to build staff commitment and capabilities, as well as to strengthen mechanisms designed to institutionalize and preserve accountability for gender results;

²¹ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Report on Plans and Priorities (RPP) 2007–2008 of the Canadian International Development Agency*, online at <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2007-2008/cida-acdi/cida-acdi01-eng.asp>.

²² CIDA, 2005. *Canada's International Policy Statement*.

- in terms of the cross-cutting integration of gender into the agency's programming and, in particular, within the new aid framework;
- in terms of the policy dialogue on gender equality with governments and donors, which must be pursued and enhanced;
- in terms of programming choices; at this level, there is a need to strengthen specific projects such as those supporting national machineries for the advancement of women and gender equality, those supporting national gender equality policy implementation and, most important, those in support of CSOs working for women's rights and gender equality.

Indeed, a fundamental priority in this new environment, one for which CIDA's efforts are still falling short, concerns support for CSOs working for women's rights and gender equality, and more specifically women's organizations and movements. In a context where numerous staff members of international cooperation organizations perceive a loss of legitimacy for their efforts to promote gender equality because of the principle of local ownership, we must encourage the work of local CSOs, which have a decisive role to play in getting these issues on the political agenda and holding their national governments to account on their gender equality commitments. In this regard, CIDA, like the other donors, must play a more active role in marshalling support for women's rights organizations and promoting the establishment of dialogue and consultation forums and mechanisms that allow for more effective participation in policy debates. As things stand, these forums remain too impermeable to CSOs, and even more so to women's rights organizations.

At present, CIDA's support for women's rights organizations takes the form of gender funds managed in the field. These funds generally produce good results, but their value is questioned

by certain CIDA officials who consider them too cumbersome to manage. In addition, CIDA contributes to Canadian CSOs that support Global South organizations.

The role of Canadian CSOs is extremely important: 83% of CIDA funding earmarked for Global South CSOs passes through these Canadian organizations.²³ They are the principal stakeholders in Canadian international cooperation efforts directed at Global South civil society, thus the prime intermediaries between CIDA and Global South civil society. Nor should one ignore the considerable contribution that these Canadian organizations make in terms of their own fundraising. All of which leads to the second focus of this study: the contribution of Canadian CSOs to gender equality and women's rights.

2. Contribution of Canadian CSOs to gender equality²⁴

It is well known that civil society is often one of the strongest, most powerful sources of support for gender equality in any given country, as well as a source of expertise in this field. To what extent does this statement characterize the work of Canadian international cooperation organizations?

There are over 500 CSOs in Canada that do international cooperation work, including unions, community organizations, religious organizations, and a wide variety of others. In this paper, I focus on the narrower group of international cooperation organizations (ICO) *sensu stricto*.

It is important to mention at the outset that any ICO receiving CIDA funding must obey the agency's Policy on Gender Equality and promote the policy in all its work. As well, many ICOs have adopted their own gender

²³ Réal Lavergne and Jacqueline Wood, 2008. "CIDA, Civil Society and Development: a Discussion Paper," assembled by the authors with input from CIDA's Expert Group on Civil Society, draft of February 26, 2008.

²⁴ This aspect of the study was conducted in close cooperation with the Comité Québécois Femmes et Développement (CQFD) of AQOCl and with the CCIC.

equality policies. According to recent surveys of a small sample of organizations, 88% of CCIC members and 50% of AQOCI members have adopted gender policies.²⁵ However, the actual percentages are probably lower due to positive self-selection bias in the survey.

These organizations' commitment to gender equality takes various forms:

- Most organizations have opted for the integrated or cross-cutting approach.
- A smaller number of organizations also have specific or targeted gender initiatives, but the number of these has declined in the last decade. According to the organizations surveyed, the adoption of the cross-cutting approach and, more recently, the sectoral concentration requirement, are the main reasons for the decline in specific women focused projects.
- It is interesting to note that of all the organizations receiving partnership funding from CIDA, only three work exclusively on women's rights and gender equality.

The degree of integration of gender equality varies widely. A large proportion of the organizations have adopted gender terminology and some have adopted gender equality policies, but it is at the level of implementation that the problems arise.

It is true that those ICOs that are furthest ahead on gender share a pool of best practices, know-how, and expertise in terms of both the cross-cutting approach and specific projects (combating violence against women, women's economic empowerment, etc.), but these organizations represent a small minority of the total. For the large majority of ICOs, considerable efforts are still required for them to begin to fulfill their gender equality commitments. A large proportion of the organizations have only superficially

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integrated gender into their work, and the interviews conducted in our survey point to a great need for support and assistance.

Most of the organizations are, in particular, having difficulty institutionalizing the cross-cutting approach to gender. Their success is still highly dependent on the commitment, abilities, and knowledge of individuals. The consequence is that the organization's gender equality policy often tends to "evaporate" between its adoption and its implementation. Factors explaining this phenomenon include:

- a lack of genuine political will;
- a lack of commitment to gender equality, manifesting itself as active or passive resistance;
- a lack of specialized human resources, a lack of tools and/or knowledge, and a certain confusion as to the real meaning and intended results of gender equality;
- an organizational culture that do not put enough priority on gender considerations (and here it is worth noting that positions of power are still held, in the main, by men);
- a need for stronger gender institutionalization procedures and mechanisms;
- a lack of accountability mechanisms.

²⁵ Rita Soares Pinto, *L'institutionnalisation du genre dans les organismes de coopération internationale au Québec: état des lieux et défis*, study conducted with the support of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation and in collaboration with CQFD/AQOCI; CCIC, 2008. *Gender Equality, Promise to Practice: A Study of the Progress toward Gender Equality of CCIC Members*. David Kelleher and Rieky Stuart

Another phenomenon that appears to be growing is the depoliticization of gender mainstreaming, reducing this approach to an exclusively “technical” or “mechanical” issue and evacuating its transformative political nature.²⁶ Thus, in many cases, attention paid to gender integration is largely instrumental in nature (meeting donors’ requirements) and focuses on short-term solutions instead of seeking to alter power relations, a necessary step in achieving durable gender equality.

Having met these and other challenges, a number of ICOs have started to revise their approaches. Some have made women’s rights and gender equality central to the mission of the organization, while others have increased the number of specific projects predicated on a rights-based approach. Many are in the process of adopting or revising their policies, while some are making concerted efforts to find innovative methods for institutionalizing their commitment. Behind most of these initiatives are individuals – women’s rights activists – who are fighting internally for a stronger commitment and greater organizational capacity on gender equality. Acting often informally and on their own initiative, they play a role in monitoring and catalyzing these changes.

3. Renewing the commitment and practices of Canadian international cooperation organizations vis-à-vis gender equality and women’s rights

As we have just seen, both CIDA and the ICOs must see to it that gender considerations are given their due. They must review and revise their practices as regards gender equality and women’s rights. The challenges they are facing demand that they implement processes to strengthen the commitment, skills, and knowledge of their personnel, and also to transform their internal culture and organizational policies. Among other things, these organizational change processes call for measures to develop gender equity within each organization’s structures,

procedures, and culture. I will not enter here into the details of these matters²⁷, but instead concentrate on external interactions and catalysts for such organizational changes.

I contend that this process of change must be viewed through the lens of mutual responsibility for gender equality. In my view, this concept is critical to the creation of an environment conducive to gender equality in Canadian cooperation. Central to this concept is the idea that relations between international cooperation actors must be reinforced so that they can influence one another and play a role as drivers of change.

Specifically, and in the first place, CIDA must heighten its positive influence over the ICOs, making sure that they obey and effectively implement its Policy on Gender Equality. Most of the organizations surveyed stated that CIDA requirements were a significant factor motivating the integration of gender considerations into their work. This factor must be emphasized and made more constant, less prone to the influence of individual CIDA managers, and above all more constructive. The following questions must be asked: If gender equality is a priority for CIDA, shouldn’t it be an eligibility criterion for CIDA funding? What role should CIDA play in the creation of an environment favourable to learning, so that those organizations furthest behind on gender equality can make progress on their commitments? How should one go about creating such environments conducive to gender equality?

Second, one remarks that there has been relatively little dialogue on gender equality between the ICOs and CIDA in recent years. It is important for the most progressive ICOs on women’s rights to carry on a sustained

²⁶ Rita Soares Pinto, 2008. *L’institutionnalisation du genre: de la conceptualisation théorique à la mise en pratique (AQOCI, Comité Québécois femmes et développement)*.

²⁷ Among other sources : M. Mukhopadhyay, G. Steehouwer, and F. Wong, 2006. *Politics of the Possible: Gender Mainstreaming and Organisational Change: Experiences from the Field (KIT Publishers and Oxfam Publishing)*.

dialogue with CIDA. In particular, they should play more of a monitoring role, present context-sensitive analyses and recommendations, and advocate for CIDA to honour its gender equality commitments. Given the current unfavourable climate towards such policy dialogue, it is important for these organizations to act more collectively and proactively in holding CIDA to account. As an added benefit, such action may create more space for officials advocating for gender equality within CIDA.

As a fundamental condition for instilling such a dynamic of dialogue, there must be more openness on CIDA's part to creating opportunities for interaction with ICOs and for engaging in consultative and participatory processes.

Third, it is important to strengthen ties among CSOs. We must create opportunities for dialogue, mutual learning, and pooling of gender equality resources and tools. Forums such as the Comité Québécois Femmes et Développement (CQFD) must be strengthened and initiatives such as communities of practice must be encouraged. Such initiatives are likely arenas of peer emulation. Moreover, they are highly important in supporting the efforts of women's rights activists who are lobbying within their respective organizations for more sustained attention to gender considerations.

Finally, we must develop and consolidate strategic alliances with the women's movement in Québec and Canada, with

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trade unions, and with other actors who can help us have a stronger impact. Also, it is critical to develop ties with academic researchers if we are to continue to innovate and deepen our understanding of the relevant issues in this changing context. And of course, these efforts must be nourished and guided by an ongoing dialogue and close relations with our partners in the Global South and with the women's organizations and movements in the countries where we work.

Enhancing our mutual responsibility for gender equality will allow us to create an environment conducive to the promotion of gender equality and women's rights through learning, innovation, and peer emulation. It will enable us to establish a sustained dialogue and incentives and to exert mutual pressure in favour of more consistent gender equality integration.
